

# IMAGE IN THE WINDOW

A NOVEL OF A WASTREL AND THE WOMEN WHO LOVED HIM

JOHN  
COUSINS

*The hero who is no hero can have a fascination of his own. This is an unusual novel about such a man and his desperate progress to something like self-knowledge.*


# IMAGE IN THE WINDOW

## JOHN COUSINS

Ever since childhood, whenever Hugh Maunt was in trouble he had always finally gone to his cousin Jean Jegon for help. So it was that this time — this truly critical time — the Jegons once again took him into their peaceful Sussex estate. There Hugh could devote himself to training Moonraker, a vicious horse only he could handle, for the Charlton Cup race and, in doing so, try to forget the facts of his past.

The Jegons thought they knew those facts. They thought they understood the crucial weakness in Hugh's character that had caused him to walk out on his wife. But they didn't know the one tragic event that Hugh would have to admit, at least to himself, before he could at last achieve his moment of truth.





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IMAGE IN THE WINDOW

*By the same author*

THE DESOLATE MARKET

SECRET VALLEYS

JOHN COUSINS

IMAGE IN THE  
WINDOW

There, you said, goes a self regarder  
His image in the window shatters  
The damp view of the autumn garden.  
... Seeing no face but fire and martyrdom  
Down at the end of the damp garden.

MONTAGU SLATER

DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC.

GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK

1960

Three lines of the lyric of the musical composition,  
"Someone to Watch over Me," by George Gershwin.  
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## *Contents*

BOOK ONE: 1937      *page 9*

BOOK TWO: 1929-32      *page 99*

BOOK THREE: 1933-7      *page 223*

For  
THEO NEWMAN  
and in memory of  
MONTAGU SLATER

BOOK ONE

1937





THE wind lifted the mat by the door.

1 There was a scrunch of gravel outside. The barman said, 'That's the Worthing bus, miss.'

She slid off the high stool by the bar, and went to the window, looking down at the green bus standing in the forecourt by the sign 'BEACH HOTEL'; but no one got off.

A streak of sunshine, yellow and thin as candlelight, moved away slowly eastward, across the salt meadows. As the point of light touched them, a gorse bush flickered, the sea gleamed mackerel-green, the salt-bleached groynes shone like square ivory keys against their own shadows, and the coast road stood in relief, and then everything drowned in a twilight darkness of cloud. A drop of rain splashed on the window, another, and another — like wet prints of paws.

Brusquely, digging her hands into the pockets of her raincoat like a self-conscious boy, she turned back to the bar, looking round the blue scumbled walls, the gilded scribbled mural of dolphins, and waves, and girls in wide sun-hats — a lighthouse — a yacht. The gold paint was tarnished and green from the sea air, and by the door there was a white salt stain like a sweat mark on a dress.

It was not Hugh's sort of place at all, really. Yet there must have been some reason for him to choose it as their meeting place. With Hugh there was always a reason, even when he was not aware of it himself. But she could not find the mood — the link.

She ordered the other half, and when the barman pushed the pink gin across the counter she took it over to the other window. She did not pay. That would provide an excuse for giving Hugh money in public if he hadn't enough to pay when he came.

She was looking out at the sea-front — the boarding houses, the iron shelters, the stones scattered along the esplanade by the December gales, the green iron chains along the front, the grey skies, the rain — when she saw him, in the distance, walking along the curve of the front.

He was walking hesitantly, dawdling beside the chains, and making little downward patting movements with his hand, in a counter rhythm to his steps. She knew he was counting the spikes. At the fourth link on each chain there was a spiked ball like a medieval weapon, to stop people swinging.

As children they had counted them. The memory was almost a physical sensation of being a child again: the feel of a bathing dress moist and sticky against her body, damping the crispness of the gingham frock she wore over it; of warm wind round her bare and crusted legs; of the distant thump of the regimental band; of sunlight like a banner; and of herself and Geoffrey and Hugh marching triumphantly from one end of the front to the other, touching every spiked ball, counting them, drugged and ecstatic with counting, unable to stop counting even if they had wanted to — and then, catching one another's eyes, bursting into laughter, reeling all over the place with laughter, because it was so funny when you stopped counting.

Nineteen years ago. She had been eight then. Hugh and Geoffrey had been seven. It was so long ago.

Yet that is why I have come to meet him, she thought. That is the true reason; not his dramatic telegram, not the trouble I know he must be in, but our shared childhood — the childhood that he will not forget.

A gust of wind wrinkled the skin of rain on the window, and the image of his blue figure trembled and liquefied like a crystal dissolving in water.

He was wet through, yet he was dawdling. Some final snobbery kept him from breaking into a run. Poor stupid darling, he has not even the sense to come in out of the rain.

It was always time that beat him. There was always something

else that had to be done before he could do the vital thing; something that had to be believed before he could face the truth. It was always as if he could not spare the energy to save himself until the last moment.

Heaven only knew from what seedy defeat he was retreating this time, but it was odds-on that by now it would be too late for her to do more than help him hush things up. There would be the explanations that were like lies, or the lies that were explanations ... a confession ...

Poor Hugh. There was something so innocent and artless about his lies. To him they were never quite untrue, never just lies; they were rather errors of judgment, or ideals that somehow he had only just failed to live up to. There was something plaintive about them, as though he was certain that if only other people would believe them too they would come true.

It was so useless. No one could ever help him: you could never really reach him. Yet she could never quite bring herself to give up trying. Against her will, against her better judgment, she would always be involved; in the end she was always on his side.

It was another five minutes before he arrived, and then he burst into the bar as if he had been hurrying. She caught sight of him first in the raspberry-tinted mirror behind the bar. It was as if she were seeing a stranger. The face that in her thoughts she always saw as the unformed face of a boy, with a kind of blind innocence that had resisted and blurred the lines that life and experience ought to have stamped upon it, seemed to have come to maturity, to completion.

It was disconcerting. She turned quickly to greet him, to see whether it was not merely an effect of the mirror, in reversing the sides of his face, or of the flattering gilded light — and she was shocked to discover how haggard he was. The skin around his eyes was bruised and transparent, like a parchment scraped and scraped again. She had an impression of total weariness like a fanatic's exhaustion: something almost medieval, as if he had been wrestling with the devil. He was at the end of his tether.

What has he been up to this time to look like that? Is it x, the unknown quantity, the thing it was always on the cards he might do?

He lifted a hand beside his eye and wiggled his forefinger in a ridiculous greeting.

'Who'd have thought of seeing you?' he said, socially.

She told herself not to be a fool. He looked like that when he was tired. Fair people often did. She did herself. She must not let herself see drama in him. It was part of the trick, that he could always make other people think of him in dramatic terms.

He sat on the stool next to her, rubbed at the rain on his wet coat. He said: 'Hence the expression Waterloo' — and grinned. His eyes flicked to the mirror in almost a reflex of self-consciousness, but he gave no sign of noticing himself there. That was disconcerting too. The old Hugh, the Hugh she knew, seeing that haggard and exhausted image in a glass, could not have helped making some tiny shift of his features to underline his mood. Quite unconsciously he would have stage-managed his face, to ensure that the things he wanted her to see were plain to be seen.

He said tentatively: 'I told myself, she won't be there, why should she bother? But I knew you'd come.' He looked at her only when he had said it, as if he had needed time to focus his eyes after being in darkness.

Outside, the rain stopped, as suddenly as it had begun. The room grew lighter, with a sharper brightness of mirror and windows; and in the brighter light their heads seemed to swim side by side out of the depths of the mirror: twin bronze heads, arrow-shaped like snakes'.

We are really fantastically alike, she thought, and in the mirror his eyes met hers.

'Peas in a pod,' he said.

In a sculptor's movement, he brushed a thumb across eye and cheekbone and down the line of his jaw; softly lifted the thumb to her cheek and pointed chin; let his hand drop.

'Great Grandpa Jegon, his thumb-print,' he said.



She stared into the mirror. We might be brother and sister instead of cousins, she thought. That might have been easier. I might have been able to look out for him better. Perhaps if we had been brother and sister, he would not have needed to lie to me; or if he had lied, perhaps I should not have minded so much.

He was watching her face in the glass. He leaned forward.

'That dog won't fight,' he said cryptically. 'That way you'd never have been so interested in me when we were kids. You wouldn't have needed to fight my battles then — so you wouldn't be here now. In a queer sort of way you were in love with me then, Jean.'

It was something she had forgotten. She had forgotten his quite animal insight when he was cornered, his unerring instinct for weakness. He knew her as only a lover ought to know anybody, but there was no kindness in his knowledge, it added nothing. It was only another weapon, another technique of defence. But if she were to help him she must keep him at arm's length.

She snapped: 'Hugh, you haven't done something really silly — put arsenic in Evelyn's tea, or anything?'

He said, in an empty sort of voice, 'Evelyn likes her tea weak.'

He turned half away from her.

'I'm sorry about that Jean — just now. It was a bloody thing to say. Only ... it was true for me too.'

He got up to close the door, with an air of ensuring they should not be overheard. When he returned he ordered drinks; a pink gin for her, and sherry for himself. He discussed Olorosos and Amon-tillados, Manzanillas and 'Solera', like a connoisseur.

He picked up the drinks, carried them over to the bow window. He did not want the barman to hear. He watched his hand hold out the drink to her hand, then he looked at her, meeting her eyes. He seemed to be hesitating.

At last he said, 'It isn't any good, is it, Jean? All my life there's been somebody — you should know, it's been you often enough — somebody to pick me up and dust me off when I've fallen down. Kiss and make well. Shield and comforter. "Poor Hugh." There's

something in me can get sympathy just like that.' He snapped his fingers. 'It's been a kind of blackmail.'

He put his sherry on the table, fished out an invisible piece of cork with his little finger-nail.

'Even I don't believe it any more. In the end, if it's going to be any good, you're alone — you've got to stand on your own feet.'

Even his egotism had failed him.

She was accustomed to his dramatic moods of regeneration, she had been prepared for the ascetic virtues — the hair shirt, the knotted cords; but the new, rather gentle matter-of-factness puzzled her.

'I mean it,' he said.

He nodded, for some reason, turned away to the window, flicked at the wooden acorn on the blind cord as at a marble; nail and wood met with a tiny sharp crack, and the cord jerked disharmonically across the grey sea.

'I've left Evelyn.'

The way he said it sounded almost tragic, and at once she was wary again. It might be a fact, but the tone of his voice made it sound like an exaggeration. He had never cared all that much for his wife anyway.

'So what?' she said tartly. 'It's been on the cards all along, hasn't it?'

'No. Not really.'

He drummed on the window-pane; the blind cord brushed his knuckles.

'There's a complication, too. She doesn't know. I haven't told her ... I just walked out and left her.' His voice was quite uninflected.

'But then, you can always write, can't you?' she said.

Surprisingly he seemed to have taken her literally.

'Yes. I was going to write.' He was owlshly serious.

The picture was out of drawing. That might be just the usual Hugh routine. He simplifies everything so much, she thought; he makes melodramas even out of the truth. But it did not seem

bad enough, important enough, to have made him come to her for help.

She was sure he had not lied. If he had not told her the whole truth, it might be because he had done something so awful that he could not bring himself to confess it, even to her.

He was looking at the sea. He had wrapped the blind cord tight around his hand, and the skin strained grey and suety through the cord. The hand hung limp, pulled by the arm's weight down against the cord. It must have been painful. He did not appear to notice. His face was stern and impassive. She could read nothing in it at all. He had come to an end.

It had always been part of their intimacy that she should never ask; that she should never confront him directly, except in a joke. She thought if she were to ask him he would not lie, but the intimacy would be shattered; she would never be able to help him again.

She must wait.

They stood in silence for a long time, then he turned to face her.

'It's always the same, isn't it? Tell me. Where do I always go wrong?'

She answered quickly, hoping only to reach him before he slipped away. 'You never trust anybody.'

'Fennel said I didn't trust life.'

His imprisoned hand made a twitching movement against the cord. He looked past it at the sea.

'Jean, I don't know how to.'

Distant, hovering under the dark cloudy haze, golden moths of sunlight fluttered on the sea.

'Look,' he said softly. 'That piece of "La mer" — the first movement — "*de l'aube à midi*".'

Music? Was that the clue? Slowly, casually, she was so afraid of startling him into a lie, she said: 'You've seen Fennel?'

He nodded towards the sea, paused, then said rather expressionlessly, 'Yes, I've seen Fennel.'

If he had seen Fennel, his tragic mood, his resignation, was

explained. Fennel was the only person in the world he had ever come to loving, perhaps even really loved. But there still seemed no reason why he should have come to her, Jean.

He said, so very slowly that it was almost meaningless:

‘I shall never see her again.’

He stared at her curiously for a long time. He was waiting for her to speak. When she did not, he shook his head, unwound his hand from the blind cord, rubbing it as the returning blood stung him. He studied the ridge across the back of his hand.

‘I need a drink,’ he said. ‘Let’s have a drink. Let’s have several drinks.’

They went to the bar; he merely nodded to the barman. Already he had built up a little tradition with the barman. He always does, she thought. Even such a tiny intimacy always makes him feel safer.

The barman went out to get another bottle of the sherry Hugh had liked. There was too much sediment in the bottle he had used before.

She opened her bag, pulled out a note from her notecase. The notecase was full of notes. He was watching. He had seen.

‘You went to the bank when you got my telegram?’

He spoke very softly. It was so like him; there were tears in his eyes.

‘Why do you bother?’ he said.

‘Habit probably.’

He stared at her for a moment. Then he shot out his hand, pointing over her shoulder. He said in a voice of iron:

‘Look, Jean. There’s a wolf just behind you. Wolf. Wolf.’

Without thinking she turned to look. The blood-sports handbill blattered in the draught.

‘You see?’ he said gravely. ‘No wolf.’

The shifting ingenuities and exaggerations of his speech, its enthusiasm and despair, could always move her: perhaps just because of the desolate emptiness it seemed to shield.

‘Oh Hugh, I do like you. You’re such a fool.’



‘No wolf.’

He got up from his stool as if to walk away from his thoughts; reconsidering. He dived into his breast pocket and produced a wallet; held it open. It was full of fivers.

She was taken aback. All the old stale dread was in her surprise — the wariness, the suspicion, and he knew that. He shut away the wallet with a sudden urgent snap, thrust it into his pocket out of sight, hiding it from her in a little rush of words.

‘Trouble is, when the wolf comes — nobody can believe you. Do you think ... would Uncle Matt mind if I came to Troy for a bit?’

‘Why should he? Do you owe him more money than you can pay?’

‘For what it’s worth,’ he said, ‘Uncle Matt is the only person I’ve never broken my word to.’ He sounded surprised that she should have needed to ask.

She said, ‘You haven’t done anything silly like forging his signature on a cheque, have you?’ She was thinking of the money.

He got up and walked towards the window. He glowered out across the parade at the sea.

‘A chap doesn’t foul his own nest.’

The saloon-bar conventionality of the remark, its seedy worldly wisdom shocked her, coming so soon after something she had felt was a true and rather painstaking frankness. Yet he was like Proteus: his character, even his appearance, changed with his company, with his dreams.

Perhaps she had been wrong in believing that one day when he found his true centre, his gentleness, his animal sensitiveness and courage, his real imagination, would make him rather a fine person. This Hugh was so shoddy. Perhaps after all that was the whole truth. One thing, she told herself — this Hugh could not have done anything very bad. He just was not big enough.

She felt rather than heard him come up beside her.

‘Jean, you know what you said.’ He jerked his head towards the window. ‘About trusting.’

Two men in blue jerseys and sea boots walked along the front,

leaning against the wind. They carried shrimping nets. The sky was like frosted glass, the sea like clay.

'I've got to find how to. It's terribly important. If I started at the beginning ...'

His voice trailed off into silence, and then his face was suddenly oddly expressionless, a skull clothed with flesh and blood.

He was trying to say something absolutely sincere, and he was searching for an algebraic way of saying it that would have no overtones of charm or policy.

'Let's go home,' he said.

2 SHE drove slowly along the Pulborough road, through the woods of Arundel Castle. Under the headlights of the M.G. the rain glinted like broken spears marching away, and the small cavern of the cockpit, warm with the smell of oil and dimly lit by the instrument panel, was intimate and safe, by the mere fact that it moved through a wild dark world.

Hugh, huddled in the bucket seat beside her, seemed lost in reverie, and they had reached the open down-hill road before he spoke.

'The road back,' he said suddenly. He had almost whispered the words, and they seemed pompous. She must have moved, shown her embarrassment in some way, because quickly, in exactly the same earnest voice, he said, 'Came the dawn.'

He began to fidget with the side screens. After a moment he went on, in the colourless algebraic tone he had used before, as if he were only making a scientific report on his thoughts, which could embarrass neither of them.

'No,' he said. 'You've got to live with the past. You can't dodge that; and every day there's a bit more of it. Only — I haven't got one ... It's all one huge might-have-been. It's never happened. It's all just words ... things I've said ... and never done ... Words. I've

got to make it happen. Just to make sense ... All sorts of things ... '

He paused, and then went on conversationally: 'Remember when I bought Moonraker? That was pretty dishonest, wasn't it? But Uncle forgave me because I was so sure that with Moonraker I could win the National for him. But I spent those two years living on my side bets as an amateur jockey, and I never even got round to riding Moonraker in anything more than a point-to-point. It's too late now to do much about the National, but Uncle's almost as keen on the Charlton. I've got to win that for him.'

'Altruistic of you.'

He blew on the end of his cigarette, and his eyes gleamed in the glow.

'You know how it used to be a thing of mine, when I was small, that I was going to be a vet?'

'You've felt ill-used because you weren't, but Daddy's offered to help you often enough.'

'Well, I'm going to do that too.'

She pulled in to the side of the road, and switched off the engine. The windscreen-wiper ticked slowly to a stop across the silence.

'How did you get the money, Hugh?'

It was better to ask now, while they were alone.

He only laughed.

'Honestly. Very honestly, in fact. Oh, so very very honestly. I introduced one gentleman to another gentleman, at least he is nearly a gentleman, he's my paternal paint-making uncle — and they gave me a thousand pounds for introducing them to each other — with a view to business. For giving them the opportunity of pouring yet more inferior paint upon a world that apparently can only be made bearable by continuous applications of discreet and all-covering paint, I got a thousand pounds.'

'Hugh, don't talk rot.'

'It's true, even the philosophy. It's true, except I was exaggerating when I said a thousand — it's actually nine hundred and eighty-three pounds seventeen and fourpence.'

'Quite a fortune.'

He said apologetically, 'I'm going to give Evelyn half. She's got to live.'

She did not answer.

'Then there are some — some — debts. Call them that. Everything's got to be put straight. That's part of it.'

'When they are straight how much will there be left?'

'About two hundred and fifty pounds, I think.'

'It doesn't sound so very much, like that.'

'Look, Jean, I've got a scheme. I've thought it all out. It's water-tight.'

In her ears, his voice held the familiar overtones: the quality of relief, of brilliant optimism, the momentary security of the drowning man who sees a straw.

'You always have,' she sighed wearily, 'and it always is.'

'Of course, always. Look ... I'm going to ask Uncle Matt to let me ride Moonraker in the Charlton Club Cup. He'll be right out of the betting, after the last two years. I'll get sixes about him easily, and you know I'm the only person he'll go with. If I get sixes to two hundred pounds, that's twelve hundred pounds.'

'What if you don't win?'

'I shall.'

It was a simple statement of fact. It was rather impressive.

She trod on the starter. 'Let's get home,' she said.

When they reached Troy she drove round to the coach house and Hugh scrambled out, disappearing into the stables. She put away her car, and followed him. He was standing at the door of Moonraker's stall. He looked ten years younger, in his excitement, and the black horse was nibbling at his thumb. She came forward, and the horse rolled his eyes wildly at the sound, lifting his head. Hugh undid the latch and entered the stall, and the horse moved sideways uneasily and stood still, askew, quarters pressed against the wall, head lifted, shivering.

'Hugh, be careful, for God's sake.'

'Why is he muzzled?'

'Daddy was going to have him put down. He's a killer.'

He lifted his hands to undo the buckle of the muzzle. 'Has he killed anyone?'

She shook her head.

'Then he's not a killer.'

He took the muzzle off. He tickled the horse's nose. The black silken lip lifted, baring yellow teeth, and the long black head stretched down beside his face, restlessly, rather treacherously.

'Hugh. Come away. Please, Hugh.'

'Why?'

The horse butted its head sideways against Hugh's head, again and again, a bully's monotonous movement prior to a real attack, and Hugh was coaxing it with little murmured endearments, meeting each blow with a little caressing sweep of his head. He seemed curiously relaxed and gentle, even amused. She could not see his eyes, but she knew he was smiling. Horse and man repeated their meaningless gestures, like genuflections to the idea of pain. She was terrified. She had seen what Moonraker could do to a man. Yet they looked so much like small boys daring each other, that she wanted to giggle. Then in abrupt anticlimax the horse ceased weaving, and turned to its manger and began to eat.

Hugh slipped out of the stall swiftly.

'I thought he was going for me,' he said. 'I thought I was done for.' But he sounded almost happy, his eyes were radiant. Then noticing her white face he was contrite. 'I'm sorry,' he said, and life died out of his voice. 'Put it down to conceit.'

He followed her out into the cobbled yard, and the moonlight.

She said, 'You are only really alive when you're in danger, aren't you, Hugh?'

He looked away swiftly from her glance. 'You see,' he said, 'I know what to do then.' He looked up at her, and his jutting sandstone-coloured hair cast a long shadow across his face in the moonlight, like a scar. 'There are no damned morals about danger.'

'Morals meaning what people think?'

'I suppose that's it. Anyway, I can cope when it's win or lose.' He laughed. 'I can only win. There isn't anything to lose.'



Poor darling, she thought; he is proud of it.

He took her arm. 'What's Moonraker done? He's in no condition for racing.'

As they walked round to the front door she told him. It had all started two years ago, in the paddock at Lewes after the Charlton, when Moonraker had tried to savage young Charles the head lad, who had ridden him.

'Remember?' she said. 'You didn't turn up. He nearly killed him. They only just got him away in time.'

He said, 'Young Charles butchered him when he was doing his best. He used the whip like a bloody knout.'

She wondered how he knew. She went on quickly: 'He had a try at old Charles after that. Stalked him from behind two farm horses; but old Charles got away with just a torn sleeve.'

He had killed a couple of hounds, and the stable cat his friend, and attacked an old tramp, who had nearly died from his injuries.

'But why?' said Hugh sharply. 'What's the reason?'

'Breeding.'

'No! No it isn't! That's not true!' He was almost shouting.

'Charles says he was gelded too late.'

They were on the terrace below the house. As always, he tried to take the front steps in a standing jump; he landed one from the top, stood still balancing, then turned swiftly.

'That's the highest I've ever managed,' he said, more quietly, looking down at her. 'You said Uncle was going to have him put down. Why didn't he?'

'Because of you,' she said. 'That's the answer you wanted, isn't it?'

She opened the front door. Welcome boiled up around him. No prodigal had ever been welcomed more completely, more inevitably. The dogs. Her father cursing the dogs, holding out his hand high above them to Hugh. Mrs Timewell the housekeeper, smiling and waiting: Hugh was her darling, too. Jean's mother hugging Hugh, holding him at arm's length and kissing him again. A host of tiny sounds and movements only concerned to show



pleasure at his arrival. Yet it seemed to Jean that Hugh was holding back unwillingly from it all — not just out of shyness, but from some deep embarrassment, exactly as if he did not want them to come too near him until he had had a chance to tell them he had measles, or leprosy, or something frightfully infectious.

He is so emotionally simple-minded. He wants to say, 'Would you welcome me like this if you really knew what I've done?' — and we are all saying, 'It doesn't matter what you've done. We love you.' But because no one can put it into words he cannot believe it.

Her father said, 'Show the boy his room, Bess, and when he's clothed and in his right mind there'll be a drink for him in the library.'

Then her mother and Hugh were alone, and Jean felt like an intruder.

Mrs Jegon said: 'You're in your own little room, Hugh. We always keep it ready.'

'It's nice to be back, Aunt Bess. It's been a long time.'

'Much too long, Hugh dear. But you're here now, so we won't say any more about that, and now I've got you I'm going to fatten you up. You're too thin, boy. You've been working too hard.'

'I don't think it's that, Aunt Bess.'

'I don't want to hear what it is, dear. I just want you to be happy now.'

'Really glad to see me, Aunt Bess?'

'Of course, dear.' Her gentle, impermeable, Edwardian serenity gave the words a tone of vague reproof. 'We've missed you, you know, Hugh. I've missed having a young man about the house. Uncle's out so much.'

They went up the wide shallow curve of the staircase, Hugh holding her arm with a mocking lover-like solicitude that was at once impertinent and endearing, and she was apologizing because she had to go out that evening.

'It's my night for my women. We're doing a Byrd motet for the Lewes Festival. Tremendously polyphonic and great fun. They're

splendid at it really, but they get so cast down, poor dears, if I'm not there to help them.'

'Aunt Toscanini,' Hugh said gravely, and she laughed.

They both sounded so happy. If only this time it could last.

Jean went through the hall to the lobby to hang up her mackintosh. She found herself wishing she had made an excuse to go up with them. She was afraid of what might come out while the two of them were alone, afraid that Hugh, caressed by his welcome, flattered by the vague almost cryptic tenderness her mother always showed towards her menfolk, might blurt out everything; and she was quite sure that, whatever Hugh had done, it had to be kept from her mother — at least for the time being, for the immediate now.

3 EARLY next morning Jean heard Hugh tiptoeing down the passage. On an impulse, she slipped on a dressing-gown and went out.

He turned, a swift shadow against grey walls.

'I didn't want to wake you,' he whispered.

A switch clicked and they stared at each other, blinking in the yellow light. He said, 'Sorry,' but did not turn it off. He was wearing breeches and leggings and a turtle-necked sweater.

He smiled uncertainly, leaned sideways over the curved balustrade, to look down the well of the staircase — to see if they could be overheard.

'I was going to take Moonraker out. To see how he goes,' he said softly. There was a defensive note in his voice.

He switched off the light. 'It's too early to look at people,' he said, and paused. 'I was going to take him over to old Venus's. Jake's bound to be there at this time of the morning. Probably just back with a couple of Uncle's pheasants.'

'You're not planning to have Jake up here, are you?'

'I was.'

'Well, Daddy's given strict instructions that he is not to come on to the estate for any purpose whatsoever.'

'Why?'

'Of course — it was after your last visit. There was an awful stink. Young Doris — that housemaid we had — got in the family way and went to Jake — Jake of all people — to help her get rid of it. He nearly got rid of her too. She nearly died.'

She heard him fiddling with the switch. It was loose, and it made a pattering sound like a mouse in the wainscoting.

'Jake, the bloody fool.' But he was whispering.

She said abruptly: 'Hugh, I think I'll come with you. Wait for me.' She went into her bedroom.

In three minutes she was ready. Hugh was still leaning against the wall in the darkness, fiddling with the switch.

'It's getting late,' he said doubtfully. 'Perhaps we'd better give Jake a miss.'

'We'll go and see him,' she said firmly.

In the stable yard, while Hugh gave Jean a leg up, Moonraker rolled his eyes viciously. When he went over to mount, the big black horse was sweating, and under the damp hide of withers and neck, small muscles quivered and stretched like long fine hair run through by a comb. The rings of the snaffle were flecked with foam. As Hugh gathered the reins, the horse shifted uneasily, and his ears went back.

Jean called, 'Look out!' but Hugh was in the saddle, and his foot had found the other stirrup before Moonraker struck.

He lashed out savagely, with both hind legs together, twice. Hugh gentled him, blackguarding him in a lover's whisper.

He said softly, 'Give me a lead through the gate. Quick, Jean.'

Jean pushed the high green gate open. Moonraker, with one panicky backward look, clattered over the cobbles, out on to the road after Jean's mare, and then baulked, roaring, dancing frenziedly, ears laid back, nostrils cracking, his neck twisting round savagely, teeth bared to attack Hugh's legs. Each time the horse's

head came round like an uncoiling spring, Hugh pressed him up to the bit with his knees, leading him into repeated figures of eight, until the horse, unsure whether he was obeying his own will or Hugh's, stood still and listless.

Jean led off the road on to a bridle-path towards the downs — far-off rounded shadows outlined black against the pigeons'-feather grey of the sky — and Moonraker's stride quickened and lengthened to race the sound of his own feet on the stiff frosted grass.

Hugh held him in firmly until they reached the slow, easy slopes at the foot of the downs; then he let him have his head, until he was almost at a racing gallop and Jean and her mare were left behind. Then he waited for Jean to come up with him again, and they rode on down the valley.

A little later she glanced at him. Absurdly, pompously, and somehow endearingly, he was sitting very straight in the saddle: very equestrian, and preoccupied with style. His feet were balanced exactly in the stirrup irons, and he was fingering the reins delicately, flexing and unflexing his wrists so that each movement of the bit was a small caress in the horse's mouth to collect it, and the horse's neck was arched as in a *manège*.

'“A proper consternation of talent”,' she quoted softly; and he flashed a little smile of contentment, as if he were pleased she had seen through him. 'You've still got to get off,' she said.

Then for some reason he was talking nineteen to the dozen. He was relaxing.

'I'm never going to get off. I shall have all my meals on horseback. Like the Commendatore in *Don Giovanni*. The Stone Guest. When I go to a party they'll serve me in the stables. “Excuse me, Mr Maunt, I always forget, but your horse prefers sherry to a sidecar, doesn't he?” Or better still Jean, “Would you and Moonraker care for a hoof at bridge?”'

He put Moonraker at a gate. With a great piston-thrust off his hocks the horse surged over.

'That's more like it!' he shouted.

They cantered across the frosty fields. Below, towards Amberley,

the water lay in the meadows, making brown oily stains on the faintly green-speckled whiteness of frost; the grey sky raced over their heads. In the hedges, in the trees, the dawn chorus was beginning, a cock crew belatedly from Elliot's farm in the river valley. The air was icily pungent in their noses.

'It's almost worth getting up early for,' she said.

But Hugh reined Moonraker up.

'The peak of condition,' he said. 'It's no good, Jean. It won't work. Look — he's broken out again.' His hand ran over the dark skin. It was soaked with sweat. His fingers left white railway lines of scum on the horse's neck.

'Wasn't that rather what you were going to see Jake about?'

'He's not a magician.'

'Hadn't you better ask him before you give up hope?'

He nodded abstractedly. He looks quite desperate, she thought.

The horses clop-clopped slowly down the metalled lane, until they reached the smithy. There was a deal board across the wide, dark opening before the forge, that read:

'ERASMUS VENUS, SMITHING AND ODD JOBING.'

A young man with a high-coloured, bony face slouched down the path towards them. His curly black hair was wet from the pump; it hung in coils, like teased strands of rope, over a narrow secretive forehead. He greeted them with a kind of secret, wary indifference.

'Morning Miss Jean,' he said. 'Hullo Hugh. Didn't expect to see you, Hugh.'

In that small familiarity, so small she might never have noticed it if Hugh had not been so anxious she should not, everything was confirmed. She heard Hugh say, too affably, too smoothly:

'Thought you'd be back, Jake. I suppose it's no good asking if you did any good.'

'The rabbits is two-a-penny nowadays.' Jake's voice was impersonal ... not even contemptuous.

Hugh said, 'Over-production.'



Why did he always have to make silly jokes? Why couldn't he just be quiet?

Jake said, 'Maybe they've no one to stop them when they've started.'

There was a silence.

'Dad's away,' Jake said. 'If you want shoeing, that is.'

Hugh shook his head. 'It doesn't matter,' he said, but he dismounted — and at that moment Moonraker reared.

Bright noise exploded, as hooves struck out sparks on the flints, bit and bridle rang, and Moonraker screamed — a high, shuddering whinney — holding forelegs and iron-shod hooves poised like pile-drivers over Hugh's bare head.

In a sudden reflex, as dramatic as the noise, Hugh hurled himself at the horse, hands reaching up past the high down-striking hooves, his face strained and pale beside the yellow teeth, groping for the cheekpieces of the headstall — for the chain of the curb — for any hold.

Horse and man fought in silence apart from their feet clattering on the cobbles. Hugh's coat was covered with specks of froth from the bit, as the horse plunged, shaking him till it seemed his neck must snap. Blood ran down his face from a gash over his eye where the bridle-pieces had struck it, and his fingers strained — bending back as he hung on despairingly. At last the shaking stopped, and Moonraker reared again — and momentarily all was still. Like a symbol in a dream, horse and man were held motionless in a rising tide of struggle, were fused together in a straining arch, poised interminably against a grey sky and the grey weathered wattles of the fence.

Then, very slowly, the arch subsided, settling back into components of horse and man. Forelegs made little ineffectual foot-steps in the air and then came to the ground. A coin of foam dropped, and the black, moist skin over the withers began to twitch and quiver. Hands released their hold, wiped away blood and spittle; and there was silence like an awakening. Then, theatrically, Hugh kissed the horse on the nose.



Jake sucked the air in through a hollow tooth.

'I wouldn't ha' done that for a thousand pounds.'

Hugh said swiftly, as if to catch Jake while he was off guard: 'There's a cure, Jake?'

'Maybe.'

Hugh opened his mouth to speak; shut it; said nothing.

Jake began a careful examination of the horse's eyes, making passes with his hand to test their reflexes. Hugh waited, watching, his eyes pleading, his body a little bent as if in supplication. It was exactly as if he were casting himself on Jake's mercy, but behind his back. She was sure that if Jake turned and saw him, Hugh would stiffen into a pose of proud nonchalance just about a second after Jake had seen. He could not face the humiliation of asking a favour from someone he had treated so badly — but he was prepared to trap him into offering. Jean was still shaken by the animal gallantry of his fight with the horse.

'We ought to be getting along,' she said quickly. 'We'll be late for breakfast.'

Hugh pulled himself together. 'Just a minute, Jean.' His face had taken on the emaciated skull-like look of his more desperate decisions. 'Jake,' he said harshly, 'I'm riding him in the Charlton. That's in eight weeks' time.'

'You'll never have him ready in time.' Jake's voice was faintly contemptuous.

Hugh frowned. 'If you can cure him — I'll pay you. Anything in reason.'

Jake said: 'Pay.'

'I shouldn't have asked,' said Hugh. 'Let's get home, Jean.'

Jake did not appear to have heard. He was whispering in the horse's ear, running his fingers gently between the curb-chain and the skin that was like worn and wrinkled velvet. When he spoke, his eyes shifted, only just perceptibly, to meet Hugh's, then back to the horse.

'Course it could be done,' he said. 'It's all in knowing how.' It was as if he spoke to the horse, rather than to Hugh.

'I see'd a zebra in a circus oncet Miss Jean, driving round the ring in a pretty little sulky. Real sweet, it was. Dainty. Took lumps of sugar and bits of apple from the hand. Like a little stripy pony it was. And tame ... There's nothing more untameable than a zebra. But this one was gentle, like a pony.' He paused, and his face was impenetrable — closed, as if he had shut off all outward personality. He shook his head, and let go of the bridle. He looked at Hugh steadily.

They were all silent, there was nothing to say, the thing was an open secret between them, and there it ended.

Hugh collected the reins and mounted Moonraker, looked irresolutely at Jean, and then said desperately, 'I'll be down to talk with you later, Jake.'

'Maybe.'

They rode up the lane in silence. Horses' hooves dropped softly, bruising the frost, leaving crushed green prints on the white rime. Jean felt Hugh watching her.

Suddenly he spoke. 'Jake's a damn good chap,' he said as if to defend him.

She said bitterly: 'I'll say one thing for you, Hugh, you don't bear malice towards the people you've hurt. Or is it just your way of making out that nothing's happened?'

She knew she was going to cry. Her eyes were stinging, the first tears were icy on her cheeks. Hugh must not see. He must never know that anything he could do could still hurt so much that she would cry. With little demented jerks on the reins, and little secret kicks at her mare's flanks, she tried to ride ahead, but Hugh kept Moonraker abreast; and trailing thorny branches from the hedgerow, white with frost, dragged softly against her habit, like unwelcome thoughts. She could not escape.

She burst out: 'Oh Hugh, couldn't you have told me? I'd have done something. You know I would.'

'About Jake and Doris and the little one?' His voice was wilfully, casually brutal. 'There's nothing to tell. Not even a lie.'

'Except that you left Jake to pay for something you'd done.'

'I'd done nothing — as if I ever do.' He gathered up the reins, until Moonraker's neck was flexed like a chess-man and the horse danced restlessly. He spoke harshly; but his words had no resonance on the cold air, they were unrelated to personality, as footfalls on ice. 'Doris was in trouble. I asked Jake to help her. He did. It was a failure.'

'Oh Hugh, stop. Please, please, stop.'

'Why so bloody certain I put Doris in the family way?' There was a kind of malevolence in his tone.

'Isn't Jake? Aren't we all? Or am I supposed to think it was a virgin birth?'

'Virgin abortion.' His hand dropped on to the saddle pommel, in a movement of anger that did not quite get completed and that turned to something else — was it self-pity?

'What's the use?' He stared ahead with dead, tragic eyes. 'If I tell you the truth ... you can't believe it ...'

She said, 'That's hardly my fault.'

He shook his head, still not looking at her. 'No, it's my fault. It's entirely my own fault, and there's nothing I can do about it except live with it.' Then he turned, and smiled as if he perfectly understood. 'That's exactly what I'm going to say about it, Jean.'

'Now you've arranged it so that I've got to feel I'm being unfair, hadn't you better tell me the version you want me to believe?'

'Just what I told you. I found the girl Doris crying like anything, once when she was dusting my room. So I asked her why. She told me. People do tell me things. Things they're ashamed of. I expect they feel I've done worse. Anyway she told me. She was in a panic. I wanted her to tell Timey, but she wouldn't hear of it. So I took her down to Jake. It was crazy — wicked, perhaps. But if it hadn't been Jake, it'd have been some dirty old bitch with a knitting needle.'

'All out of the purest altruism?'

'Everyone tells me I'm awfully good with children.'

From somewhere quite close came a long gurgling scream — like

a terrified child's. Hugh went white. He reined up Moonraker by a gate into a field overlooking the valley.

'It's a hare,' he said. 'It's only ... Look — over there.'

She could see nothing. He slipped off Moonraker's back, pushed through the squeeze, saying with certainty: 'Moonraker'll be all right.'

Moonraker moved nervously, clinking his bridle. But he was all right. Of course. Jean even made herself bend down to gentle him.

When she looked up, Hugh was bending down by a gap in the hedge. In his hands he held the hare, and the hare was quite still, waiting to be released. He could not loosen the thin noose of wire enough to slip it over the hare's head, so he picked up animal, and snare, and anchoring small log, and carried them towards her. It had only taken half a minute.

He is so bloody deft, she thought angrily. And it has nothing to do with being fond of animals. It is miles from that particular form of sentimentality. It is partly that his physical reactions are seconds faster than most people's, so that he does not need to think; and it is partly something else — something hard, and unemotional, and astoundingly precise — a kind of dark knowledge, as if he really understands only with his body.

I suppose it is intuition. Animals feel it. People feel it when they first meet him; it goes, afterwards, but at first it is always there. Women feel it especially. Doris must have felt it.

As long as he leaves things at that level, without words, everything is always right — unexpected perhaps, but right. He never puts a foot wrong then. As with Moonraker just now.

It is the only thing he has got. But he is ashamed of it. He will not trust it. It has to be pushed out of sight. He is a wolf in sheep's clothing, but he is taken in by the sheepskin he wears. He tries to like grass and the thought of being mutton, he tries to be sheepish and bleat, he gets hurt and bewildered because the sheep are never really taken in. So all that genuine thing becomes just a confidence trick, to get by for long enough to borrow a half-crown or get a tart into bed with him.

He came towards her. The hare bit his hand.

'Who said hares were timid?' he said.

They released the wire loop drawn so tight in the thistledown of under-fur. The hare lay in his arms, shrunken into its fur, still and trembling. Hugh ran his hand over it, and put it down on the ground. It hopped a few paces away, and sat on a furrow watching them.

Jean shoo'd it.

'Go away hare, go while the going's good,' she said. 'It's not exactly mad with joy, is it, Hugh? Oughtn't it to be running round in ever-increasing circles? Is it all right?'

He nodded. 'It's all right. It's just free, and when you're free you don't have to do anything. You're just free,' he laughed.

'How the devil do you know?' she said. She looked up and met Hugh's eyes.

He said: 'So you do believe it wasn't me got Doris into trouble?'

She nodded.

During the morning he disappeared. He missed lunch. About three o'clock she heard him going upstairs. She went up to the old schoolroom after him.

He was standing at the window with his back towards her. He did not look round.

'Hullo, Jean,' he said.

'Well?'

'All settled.'

He turned round. He had a black eye and his lips were puffy and torn, and there were strips of plaster on his knuckles.

'What happened?'

'Oh, I told Jake that if he was a clumsy abortioneer that was his fault, not mine. He said I'd got Doris into trouble myself and run away from the stink. I said "Say that again and I'll knock you down." So he did, and I went at him, and he gave me quite a hiding. When I came to he was standing over me, looking a bit worried. I was going on — I hope — but he said he could give me three stone



and he hated fighting, and he'd always thought it was most likely young Elliot at the farm who had put Doris in the family way, him being the village ram. So we washed and went up to the Labouring Boys for a pint or two, and now I've got a splitting headache.'

'So your little friend is going to train Moonraker, and you're both going to live happily ever after?'

'I've still got to get Uncle's permission.'

He buttonholed his uncle just as he was going to bed, getting off to as bad a start as he could ever have hoped for.

When he tapped on Jean's door an hour later, she was in bed. With gloomy distaste, as if he regretted all his earlier enthusiasm, he said: 'That's settled. Uncle said he'd put the fear of God into Jake, and it would be all right.'

The thing said, his interest in it was ended. He prowled round the room, coming to rest by her dressing table, studying its bare, shy simplicity with tremendous interest, as if its severity held a secret. He caressed the initialled silver backs on the brushes, he picked up the little blasted china tree for rings.

'Nice,' he said. 'It's like you to have a ring tree. Exactly.'

At length he said, with such irrelevance that she guessed he must be quite deeply moved: 'Uncle Matt's queer, isn't he?' He squinted along the top of the mirror to see if it was square. Then he came and sat on the end of her bed, puffing up the eiderdown into long sausages between his fingers. 'He's so good, Jean.'

'So kind to Hugh?'

'No, good. Wise. I told him I needed Jake to help me train Moonraker. He asked if I knew what he'd done. I said "I was responsible." He spent a long time, then, looking all over the place for the poker. Then he asked if I was directly responsible. So I told him. What I told you. I just told him the truth. I didn't explain at all. Not anything.' He hesitated. 'But he understood, Jean. He understood.' He sounded surprised. He went over to the mirror again and stared at it. 'He told me pretty clearly what he thought of me ... I wanted to hide and change my name; run away.'

Suddenly, as if something he had seen in the mirror had



detonated memory, he swung round to face her. 'He said it was murder. Only a little baby murder, but murder just the same. He said people only murdered to hide things.' He stopped abruptly, falling into a sort of total silence.

Jean said, 'You said, "Uncle is so good." What did he say, to strike you all of a heap with his goodness?'

'Just that. He understood somehow that people are people, and he doesn't seem to mind.'

4

JANUARY went by, and the first weeks of February, and Moonraker began to improve out of all knowledge. He no longer wasted himself in shattering explosions of berserk panic. He was cross-tempered, uncertain, savage with the Barcaldine blood-line of his breeding — both his sire and his great-grandsire had killed a man — but, for Hugh and Jake at least, he would work, willingly and unflinchingly; and he was coming into condition visibly.

How Jake had done it, what half-forgotten science he had practised, no one knew. The stable boys claimed he had 'whispered' the horse. They said it was a known gipsy trick, but they knew no more about it than the name.

Jake would not discuss it, only denying passionately that it was magic he used, as if magic were still wicked. Jean had an idea that he did not really understand, himself. He was explicit enough about the steps he had taken to cure the horse's biting. He had made a bit, in his father's forge, a plain bridle with a thick wooden bar, and, except when eating or sleeping, the horse wore it always. 'The theorem,' Jake explained, fitting it carefully to Moonraker's mouth the first morning, 'the theorem is, that with this he can't never close his teeth. Not tight.' He lifted the black, wrinkled lips to show. 'If he can't close his teeth he can't bite, and if he can't bite there's no sense in trying. Anyway,' he added, 'he only bites when

he thinks he's going to be hurt. He's got a thin skin — thin like Bible paper. He's too easy hurt. Whip or brush, or spur, they all hurt him. Silly old fool,' he said. 'But he'll win the Charlton, Miss Jean. He's as proper steeplechaser as ever I seen. He 'ont never be beat.'

Then the weather broke, and they had the worst fortnight anyone could remember for thirty years. The fields and lanes were flooded and frozen for miles around.

He was a big horse, and he needed work, but it grew increasingly difficult to give him work enough to bring him into condition. There was always good going along the chalk of the downs, and in the end they had to take him up there nearly every day. That meant a five-mile walk round the spur of Camp Hill to the slopes that the horse could climb; having to lead Moonraker on foot, having to feel their way so slowly across the glittering, half-frozen, half-sodden clay, for fear of a sprain or an over-reach or a torn tendon.

Jean always went with them; would wait, shivering, while they galloped the horse along the open downs, dreading the thought of the walk home, the nerve-racking skidding descent of the down, the long drag back through heavy air like fog.

There was no need for her to be with them. She could do so little to help — hold a stop-watch maybe, take her turn at leading the horse over the rutted icebound mud of the lanes; anything she did they could do just as well themselves. Yet it seemed she could not bear to miss any of the discomfort, any of the disappointment. She had to go with them. In the afternoons, sometimes, the going improved enough to give the horse a school over fences in the paddock. Then she would ride her mare topsides up the lane of jumps, with Hugh on Moonraker. It kept the horse interested. It was almost a point of honour, too, to stay with them each afternoon while they strapped the horse. She would plait the straw into wisps for them, while Jake and Hugh, one on each side, pounded and massaged until, as the weeks went by, the muscles began to tone up and firm, and the black skin glowed like polished ebony. At the

end of that hour the two men were always exhausted, sweating no matter how cold the day.

She told herself it was only common loyalty. Hugh needed her support to face all the discouragements. But she knew the truth was more complicated. In that context he did not need her help at all. He had always been amazingly patient and good-humoured in adversity. The worse the situation the more unruffled he had always been. One took that for granted. The stiff upper lip had always been his panache.

Then one morning she was in the loose box with him, watching while he bandaged the horse's legs. He was whistling. He tied the bandage on the near hind, and getting up to move round to the forelegs he caught his foot on the upturned bucket he had been using as a stool; it fell, clattering on the cobbles, rolling down the slope towards the drain.

Startled, turning, the horse's quarters caught him off-balance and he went down, falling backwards beside the bucket. The horse reared, ears back, eyes red, forelegs poised over his body.

Still whistling, propped up on his hands behind him, Hugh did not move.

It was the agreed plan — to behave as if one was not in the least frightened. In theory it was the obvious thing to do; practice was a bit different. But Hugh went on whistling 'Sheep may safely graze', and the horse dropped its forelegs beside him, and stood still.

That was all. He righted the bucket, began to bandage the near foreleg.

Jean was so used to his moods of regeneration, so used to his dramatizing his inner conflict in absolutes of good and evil, that she found herself wondering what omens, what symbols, the knowledge of his fortitude was suggesting to his mind.

Hugh scrutinized the bandage carefully, inserting a finger to make sure it was not too tight, and began to work on the off leg. 'He's coming along nicely, old Moonraker,' he said.

It occurred to her — with a small shock of surprise — that he was just grooming a horse, and nothing more. In training Moonraker

there was no drama, there were no symbols. He was not trying to prove himself, nor to act out his steadfastness, or his honour, or his honesty, or his perseverance. For once he was not trying to prove anything, except that, weight for age, Moonraker would be the best steeplechaser in West Sussex on March 29th.

... He has changed. Somehow he is doing this because he has decided, because he wants to, because it's a true statement.

Geoffrey had said — even Geoffrey; everyone was always so willing to discuss him — 'Of course he'll finish up inside; or in a bin. For my money it's the bin, but it'll be a near thing which.'

Even she had known that sooner or later he must reach a point of no return, the point where secretiveness was so profound a veil inside that he would be cut off from all his instinctive roots and he would have to go on until no one was there at all and he was alone: in a prison cell, or an asylum — or the grave.

Perhaps nothing could have saved him except a crisis that might equally well have destroyed him: a real emergency so great that it could smash through his armour of irony and dream, and force the man inside to sink or swim: perhaps a great love, a religious conversion, or just a head-on collision with society that could not be hushed up.

'Hugh,' she said, 'why did you get so het-up the other day, when Timey said it was suicide to train Moonraker?'

He said, too idly: 'Was I?' He finished the bandaging, got up, ran his hand through the oats in the manger. Then he turned and met her eyes. 'Perhaps it was a bit near the bone.'

He stretched out over the half-door for the bucket of clean water standing ready, put it in the corner of the box.

'You tried.'

'Once. Yes.'

Then he said: 'I survived.'

Then — to show her that he was willing to answer if she found she had to question him — he paused at the stable door, and turned to look at her, waiting: standing wide-legged, and lonely, and undefended.

From outside came the ring of a pail on cobbles, the rising sound of water gushing into it. Inside there was the warm smell of horse bodies and dung, of straw and sweaty leather; the slow, sleepy fidgeting of horses' teeth grinding; the creak of woodwork as bodies turned. Hugh, waiting for her to speak, was silhouetted against the grey sky above the open door. It seemed at last that she was free of all pity, all responsibility. He was a man, no more and no less than other men, able to take what was coming. He was not a child any more.

'Let's go and get some breakfast,' she said at last. 'I'm starving.'

They were in the old schoolroom. It had been turned into a sitting-room for Jean, with bright cretonne and painted walls that her mother thought gay and suitable for a young girl. Jean had never used it much; for her it was only the old schoolroom disguised, and it had always seemed rather lonely and sad. But Mrs Timewell laid a fire in there every day now — 'Master Hugh always liked it up here,' she said — and they had fallen into the habit of having tea there in the afternoons. Every day after tea Hugh did his 'accounts'. He had made a long list of the people to whom he owed money. He worked through it steadily, writing cheques, and letters; ticking off names on the list in a very businesslike fashion.

On his own confession most of the people must have written off the money he owed them as bad debts. It must have taken quite a lot of determination, to reopen old wounds. But there was another list. In an allusive, flippant kind of way he was quite open about that too. To the people on the second list he wrote no letters or explanations: everything was anonymous. He would seal up notes in envelopes, and usually he asked her to write the addresses for him. He was embarrassed, of course, yet she had an idea he wanted her to understand what he was doing. Once again it was as if he had steeled himself to answer questions if she asked them, though at the same time he was praying that she would not.

This particular afternoon he drew the second list from his



pocket and studied it. She noticed he was holding his breath. That had always meant something.

He got up and went to the window, looking out for ages at the chimneys and the drive beyond. Then abruptly he came back to the table, slipped a pound note into an envelope, sealed it swiftly as if to get it done before he realized what he was doing, propped the envelope against the inkstand. Then he stood up, scrumpled the list into a ball, and threw it on the fire.

'Now I'm honest,' he said, 'Superficially.'

In a way, it did not seem to matter whether the letter was ever posted.

She said, 'If I'm to address that, you'd better tell me where to, hadn't you?'

He laughed. 'Would be better,' he said. But he took the pen and wrote the address himself. He stood gazing down at the envelope.

'I suppose one can't live bowed in shame for ever. But that one was so mean.' He looked at her. 'Not that the others weren't, mind you.'

'What happened?'

She had asked because she thought he wanted to tell her; but he said, in a voice so rigidly uninflected that it communicated nothing but the known fact:

'I stole something.'

She said quickly, 'Shouldn't have asked.'

'Confession is so good for something or other, isn't it?' he said socially.

He began to tidy away the papers on the table, making a lot of journeys to and from the cupboard in the corner, and it made just the small screen his self-consciousness needed.

It seemed he had stolen a drawing from a shop in Chelsea. Just slipped it under his coat and walked out with it.

'Only Jean ... it was me who'd sold it to the man. The evening before.'

She did not say anything.

'I'd planned it all out, before I did it. I was broke and I needed



some money quick. There was only the drawing I had — and it seemed ... so final, to part with it. So — I sold it meaning to steal it back. Quite deliberately.'

... It seemed so final to part with it ... She said gently, almost without note of query: 'One of your father's drawings?'

He stood perfectly still, outlining with one finger a formal flower basket on the patterned wall-paper. Once again she sensed that he was holding himself alert, nerving himself to make a true statement.

He said, 'One could go mad in this room if one were ill. Counting the posies. Perhaps I did.'

He nodded his answer, paused, and added in an expressionless legato: 'It was only a drawing of the place I used to call Arthur's Seat. The place you and Geoffrey could never find. Never-Never Land.'

She knew the picture. He had taken it with him everywhere. It always had to hang over his bed. She had to think hard to realize it was not there now.

It was a drawing in pastel on rough grey paper. The colours were like the colours in ashes, and curiously of the same consistency, so that as a child she had always thought of it as Hugh's burnt picture — as though it had been charred in a furnace, without quite being destroyed.

An old oak tree bole crusted with moss ... thin light falling through a dusty air, permeating thickets of hazel and alder ... a rickety post and rail fence overhanging a translucent wall of chalk ... and a feeling — only a feeling — that somewhere a path led through the wilderness. She remembered the scrawl in the corner — 'THE SECRET' ... Hugh's father's signature ... the date.

She said, 'I'm not worried because you pinched a picture, Hugh. For my money you could steal the Mona Lisa.'

'It's been stolen already.'

'But why did you tell me?'

'Because you asked.'

'You could have lied. You were going to.'

'You never lie to other people, only to yourself. When you lie

there aren't real people listening any more, only what you think they are; only the bits of them in my mind, I hope will believe me.'

'That takes a bit of digesting,' she said, 'coming from you.'

He laughed. 'You've got to have some reason for turning over a new leaf. Otherwise it's just a bad habit.'

The thaw came at last. Three days later, at breakfast, Matthew Jegon said: 'I'm taking hounds along the Adversane path this morning. I thought I'd look in at the copse just behind old Venus's place, and if there's a fox there we'll make it a bye day. If you can keep that horse of yours out of mischief, it'd not do him any harm to have a pipe-opener after hounds.'

Hugh stared for a long time at the kidneys on his plate. Then he said, 'I don't think I'll come, Uncle Matt. I'm too scared of a sprain, on this going.'

Matthew Jegon looked up briefly from *The Times*. 'I have to nominate him for the Charlton. I want to know about him at first hand, with things going on round him. Not in splendid isolation.'

'But —' Hugh looked at his uncle, seemed undecided whether to protest further, said finally, with a good grace: 'Very well, Uncle.' Then he added: 'He'll behave, Uncle Matt.'

'He'd better,' said Matthew Jegon grimly.

There was a salt gusty wind blowing in from the Channel, and low clouds were pouring eastward across the sky. A jay in the spinney on the hill behind the smithy was squawking angrily.

Hugh whispered to Jean: 'I'll be the death of a fi'pun note if there isn't a fox there.'

Matthew Jegon had put the hounds in to draw from the end of the covert, to work up-wind. They could hear his voice, 'Leu leu leu. Try try little darlings. Yooi try Daystar, Downright. Push 'im up you little devils.'

The hounds' fragmentary whimpering, like broken syllables, answering him, and the birds' alarm blown on the wind, came to them in ragged gusts of sound.

Hugh said: 'This wind! Bet we lose our fox.' He was relishing his certainty of failure. He quoted: ' "Take not out your 'ounds on a werry windy day." '

He stiffened, and Jean turned to see a furtive body, pressed cat-like to the earth, creep out of its covert, and set off at a heavy listening gait across the plough, brush curled on the wind. She looked at her watch automatically.

He said, 'It's a vixen, and she's in cub.' He sounded relieved.

Jean said, 'I don't see why you're in such a tiz about hunting Moonraker. There isn't a fence this side of the Arun that you can't go round. It's not likely to be a galloping day anyway. It's so simple. Just take it easy and go home at the first check. Daddy won't mind.'

He shook his head, determined to be gloomy. 'That wouldn't do at all.' She had an idea he was really shocked. 'Anyway it would be tempting fate. It would be bad luck. And it's not what I agreed to do.'

He seemed about to go on, when there was a sudden, sharp chorus of hounds speaking to a scent. Faintly throbbing on the wind from the other side of the copse came the whipper-in's yell: 'Gone awa'a'ay' — and nearer, the high '*Papapapaa*' of Matthew Jegon's horn.

Hugh grinned. 'Forward to the knacker's yard,' he said.

They cantered round the coppice. The pack was streaming away down the long slope, into the thin haze in the bottom where the wind had not reached. Scent was too tricky, even on the wet grass-land, for the hounds to travel fast. They raced in bursts, and then a fault in the air would bring their noses down to hunt for the scent that before had been all round them. They reached the long, shallow valley below Halnaker, and there was no wind. The hounds went away down the valley, swung across the road on to the wide rolling ploughland, all together like a swarm of bees, flying along as hard as they could drive, a bright patch of white, dappled black and tan and badger-pye against the dark waterlogged turf.

Jean had a job to keep her horse with Hugh as they threaded their

way through the field, until there was only Matthew Jegon and the scarlet-coated whipper-in between them and the hounds a quarter of a mile ahead. The hounds went out of sight behind a wind-break of young poplars.

Hugh yelled: 'Quicker round by the ford.'

They reached the ford in time to see the tail-end of the pack hurl themselves at the stream two hundred yards higher up. The stream was muddied and churned, as they leapt, and paddled, and swam, and scrambled out on the far side shaking themselves. The hounds turned up along the other bank, still driving hard. Matthew Jegon put his horse at the water, but cattle had broken down the banks, churning the clay into a quagmire, and his horse missed its take-off and landed in the stream in a bright halo of water.

Another red-coated figure appeared, and jumped, and fell, his horse seeming to land right on top of Matthew Jegon as he swam the stream beside his horse.

'It's Peter Catford,' Jean whispered to Hugh. 'He's filthy rich. He just coins money. He farms on his super-tax.'

Matthew Jegon waited while Hugh caught his horse. Then briefly, he was angry.

'You bloody stockbroker, riding in my pocket,' he said. 'Go home and don't come out hunting with my hounds until you've learned manners.'

'He *is* a stockbroker, too,' Jean whispered.

The man apologized, seeming to feel that that ended the matter, but Matthew Jegon was adamant.

'Either you go home or I take hounds home.'

'If that's the way you take it, Master.'

'It is.'

The man turned awkwardly and led his horse away. Grimly, Matthew Jegon watched him go. He turned to mount his horse, but he could not lift his hand to the reins.

'Queer,' he said, 'must have been so angry I didn't notice. My collar-bone's gone. A rib too, I think.'

He was looking at Jean. His hand was outstretched to give her the horn. Then he changed his mind. He looked at Hugh.

'You ought to be able to hunt hounds.'

'I think so, Uncle.'

'Well, get on, boy.'

Hugh took the horn. 'Can't I help, Uncle?'

Matthew Jigon ignored him.

Hugh rode off.

'Give me a hand with this stock as a sling, Jean, and then get on. Bring hounds back by three o'clock,' her father ordered.

She made the sling comfortable, and held the horse while her father scrambled on. Then she rode off along the bank after the hounds.

They had checked two fields on.

A flock of plover drew an intaglio, a brooch pinning scudding clouds. The hounds feathered among rushes. With surprising loudness, as though carried through hollow air, came the sound of a fish plopping in the stream. There was the feeling, rather than the sound, of pattering, as mist turned momentarily to fine rain. A road-mender joined the field on foot. The few horsemen sat shivering and silent, while the hounds made their cast, and the rain made little dragged runnels through the hair on their horses' withers.

The road-mender said to Hugh: 'Fox be garn t'ards Ricketts five minutes since.'

Hugh thanked him, and did nothing.

The field began to fidget and whisper. Slowly, one by one, the hounds were giving up. Here and there a head came up, and there was a kind of atmosphere of boredom, as if those hounds who were still feeling for the scent were only doing it for the look of the thing. They needed a lead — and at once.

Jean looked at Hugh, as if to remind him to lift the hounds and make his cast. The road-mender had given him a clue where to begin. Hugh paid no attention. His eyes were fixed on one old grizzled fifth-season hound. It was Practical. He had known



Practical in the days when he was a leggy puppy. Now he was watching him with the intense concentration of a mind-reading act.

Practical was still working. Three or four hounds growled optimistically at the gate in the corner of the field down-wind, but Hugh ignored them. He had pinned his faith to Practical, who was pushing his way slowly up to a hole in the hedge, with a little, high, preoccupied wailing, like a man humming a tune to himself while he follows a train of thought.

The hound paused, feathering, and then relaxed. Practical was always honest. He threw up his head.

With abrupt decision, Hugh trotted his horse forward, whistling to hounds as he rode up to the gate.

They came, slowly at first and then excitedly, towards him, through the gate that he held open; plunging through brown and tan and golden, like a peat river foaming over rapids, going to him as if they had known him all their lives.

Cantering away from Ricketts farm, Hugh took the pack quickly through the next field, where sheep were grazing, over a stretch of ploughland, well away from the direction the road-mender had indicated. He was backing Practical to the limit.

He began his cast, putting hounds round in a wide arc, coaxing them to get their noses down again.

'Leu, leu, leu. Try for 'im Practical. Try, try. Go on little dogs. Yoi-try for him Willow — try Ruffler.'

The hounds quested along the hedgerow, their sterns tense and quivering like pennants in a breeze. There was something there. Threading his way through the ruck, Practical puzzled out a line of his own. He was silent until he was just a little ahead of the pack, then he began to speak: uncertainly at first, then with conviction. The pack hurried round Practical, thrusting their noses down as they moved forward, as though they wanted to lift the scent from the ground, to possess it totally.

'Ark to Practical little dogs. Over over Willow. Goo' little bitch, Dryad. 'Ark to Practical. Push 'im up, you darlings.'

Lucky Hugh, Jean thought. He might so easily have taken the



road-mender's advice and lost his fox. Better be born lucky than good.

As if joined to an invisible magnet the hounds began to move faster, trotting first, then galloping. Hugh blew an ecstatic staccato *obbligato*, a succession of high, twanging D-flats, on the horn, as the pack settled down to the line, racing ahead, chanting their war cry, racing eastward away from the river, away from the water-meadows and the scabby putty-coloured clay towards the grassland and the good scenting country. The fox had abandoned trickery and boldly set his mask for home.

They drove on for a point of nearly four miles. Jean's arms ached from the pull of reins. The field was spread out over three fields behind her; Hugh and hounds were a field ahead.

The wind had dropped, and there was a yellow livid radiance over the downs. The earth was dark and gleaming below the rain-heavy sky. Hounds, and Hugh, and scarlet-coated whipper-in, seemed far off and distant and lonely: a bright, living spot moving across a landscape that was still, and deserted, and trancelike, and yellowed like an old varnished picture.

Jean settled herself down in the saddle to ride after them. Once, jumping a gate, she thought she saw the fox, a field ahead of the hounds, a great sandy dog fox trotting along easily with his brush held high.

In the distance, faintly, blown away by the following wind, she heard the hounds' throbbing chorus — then sharply, a new and higher-pitched note of spite in their voices. They had their heads up — they had seen their fox, and were hunting at view, spurting in a final effort to catch him and roll him over. There was no mistaking that particular varminty crescendo of triumph. At the sight of their quarry the pack had forgotten everything but the ecstasy of approaching climax, they were wild for blood.

As she rode towards the sound, Jean listened for the last final staccato discords that would come when their cry broke up into the different, more individual savagery of completion.

But it did not come.

After a moment or two she knew what had happened. Hugh had lifted the hounds' heads too soon—a mistake of over-eagerness, but a mistake that anyone might make.

Poor Hugh. It was such bad luck after a quite brilliant little beginning.

And yet she had almost expected it. He had been so often the gallant loser, the man beaten at the last second after heartbreaking effort. His bad luck was so much of a pattern that it no longer seemed a matter of chance, but a symbol: a trait of character — a profound and final unwillingness.

She came through a coppice to see the fox heading towards a wall at the bottom of a field. The hounds were fifty yards behind.

The fox jumped up at the wall, fell back twisting in the fall, landing on its feet. The hounds surged towards it. The fox leapt again. Its feet scrabbled at the smooth bricks. It hung vertical for a second, seeming to crouch to gather strength. Then it was up the last foot, moving like a cat easily, flowingly. A second later, the leading hounds hurled themselves at the wall. Their round feet could not find a hold. A turbulent mass of white and earthen colours boiled and leapt and cursed round the wall, while the fox delicately stepped a few paces along it and then dropped down the other side out of sight.

Hallet rode towards the gate higher up to open it for the hounds. Even from far off, Jean could see it was useless. The gate opened on a tarred road, walled on the other side. A hundred yards farther on it joined the main road. As Hallet cantered — so slowly — to the gate, a few hounds followed. Gradually the others tore themselves away from their excited frustration; but by the time they were through the gate the fox would have reached the main road. They would never pick up his scent again on the petrol-stinking tarmac.

Then abruptly the group by the wall broke into two parts; and the part that was Hugh and Moonraker was galloping along the wall away from the gate.

Hugh swung the horse right-handed, moving much too fast, and put it at the wall.

The idea was as plain as if he had shouted it. If he jumped the wall he might just be in time to head the fox back towards the hounds. The horse jumped.

It was not a terribly big jump in itself, but the landing would be on tarmac — and worst of all, there was no room to recover. There was a ten-foot space, to land and stop dead in. Hugh must be quite crazy. The road surface would be like glass. He would be lucky if Moonraker got away with a torn tendon.

Jean saw Hugh's head reappear above the wall and move along towards the gate. At least Moonraker had not fallen. She heard the hounds as they caught their fox. Then Hugh was off his horse, and out of sight.

There was a pause. Then, above the wall, she saw a knife flash — then Hugh holding the limp bedraggled body high above his head, and throwing it to the hounds.

When she came up it was all over. Hugh stood looking up at her, sad and frail, with the resigned, emaciated look that she had seen on his face the day she had met him in the Beach Hotel: the deserted, wary look, as if all vitality had been withdrawn into the citadel for a last stand.

One by one the rest of the field came up. As always, people were unwilling to let go of their excitement. They had to talk about it, justify it, boast a little about the line they had taken, compare other people's experiences to confirm their own.

Hugh checked Moonraker carefully, walking him up and down. The horse seemed all right.

Hallet came up. 'Seventeen and a half couple — all present, sir,' he said. 'Fox got Downright a nasty gash across the muzzle just before Porter got him. But she'll be all right till we get home.'

Hugh looked at the coffee-housing field with distaste.

'Let's take 'em home, Hallet,' he said.

Hallet called: 'Room for hounds, gentlemen. Please.'

They rode off with hounds all about them, Hallet in front, Jean and Hugh dropping back to the rear, riding at a slow hound jog.

Hugh was silent, withdrawn and vulnerable. After a while he said, 'Symbolical thing, the chase.'

'People have noticed it,' said Jean.

Hugh called to a hound who was investigating a rabbit run by the hedgerow.

'Come out of it, Darkness. Bad bitch.' The hound looked brow-beaten.

'It all goes to show,' he went on.

'Does it?'

'You can't cheat fate.'

The hounds were halted by Hallet to allow a motor car to go by on the Pulborough road, bustled round-footed and dainty across to the grass verge, and turned towards home.

'I used to think you could,' he said.

They jogged along in silence. Once he seemed to be going to speak, but changed his mind, and, as if to forestall a question, said something else quickly instead.

'Fate's only your own character,' he said oracularly. 'That's why you can't escape.'

'Hugh,' she began urgently. But his face stopped her: the listening look — the emptied eyes held askance from hers.

She said, 'Moonraker all right?'

'Yes.'

By the time they reached home, all the rain had gone from the wind. The sky was flecked with altocumulus clouds, the blue windows of the old grey house were dappled with their white and sepia.

Suddenly he said: 'It's silly enjoying hunting the way I do. I ought to be on Charles James's side.'

He blew a few doubled notes on his horn, and went up with the hounds to the kennels.

Later, as she passed the door of the workroom on her way upstairs to change, her father called her. She told him about the morning's run, and Hugh and Moonraker.

Matthew Jegon smiled.

'It's the type,' he said. 'They don't take precautions like us. His mother was just the same.' He shifted his arm carefully in the sling. 'That Frenchman she ran off with — he hadn't a penny-piece. But I don't believe either of them ever thought of that. They just went.'

He said abruptly, but it did not seem irrelevant: 'He's changed, Jean. He used to be such a sudden chap. But you can talk to him now. What's he been up to?'

'I don't know, Daddy.'

Matthew Jegon looked at the feed bill on the top of his desk. 'He's not in any trouble, is he?'

She shook her head, but she was saying: 'I don't know.'

'We mustn't ask, that's quite certain.' He came round and stood beside her at the front of the desk. 'I've always thought what a pity it was that his father had to be the one to find him, that time he ran away. Too difficult for them both, perhaps. And his father's such a reticent chap ...'

His voice tailed off. He began to talk about the work Hugh was doing for him.

'He said he wanted to work for his keep, so I've let him; and since I put him on to the estate accounts he's done a damn good job. He's practically running things now. Beats me how he ever finds time to do it. But he's stuck at it. He's stuck at it ...'

5 HUGH was giving Moonraker a trial over seven furlongs. Thin white light clung to bare trees and hedgerows, and the air seemed to drift between black and haphazard branches, dimming the colours of turf and plough into cold, grey vagueness. There was a smell of damp charred wood, and of leaves mouldering, and the sense, rather than the sound, of hoof-beats — a muffled throbbing in the bones of

forehead and temple, that reached the mind as sound without ever really being heard.

In a moment Jean saw the horses coming over the fences through the mist, at first detached from sound, then with the drum-beat of hooves running close behind them, then in sudden synchrony with a crescendo of movement and sound and light, that approached, was there in a wild clatter of hooves and a few flying flecks of turf and a wave of Hugh's arm, and was gone, dying away slowly, sound and movement leaving her behind: alone and apart, and for some reason, afraid.

The horses came back through the mist towards the white post where they had started, Moonraker striding out a good ten lengths ahead of the mare.

The horse passed the post. She clicked the stop-watch. Jake rode up.

'Ninety-six and three-fifths seconds, Jake.'

'Thirteen and four-fifths for the furlong. Fast enough, Miss Jean.'

Hugh came up leading the horse. Jean was at once alert, suspicious even, because he did not ask the timings. He was morose, silent.

'Why so gloomy?' she asked.

He looked up from putting a rug over the horse.

'Must it always be gaiety and happy laughter?' he said, coldly.

I must not watch him so, she thought. He is beginning to notice. If he resents me, who will be able to help him?

'Don't you want to know his time?'

'Fourteen seconds or a shade under, for the furlong, I should think.'

'A fifth of a second under.'

'He'll run himself into the ground if he tries to do four miles like that. I can't hold him.' He sounded surly.

Perhaps it would be best if I went away, she thought. Then I might see it all with new eyes and be able to understand.

'Only chancet,' Jake said abruptly. 'Get out in front. From the start; then you won't get no jostling; so, maybe you'd get time to easy him for his second wind.'



Hugh said, 'What if we have a fight at the gate, like just now, and we get jostled coming through — what then?'

Jake sucked his hollow tooth.

Jean said bitterly: 'Happy now? Now you've proved you can't possibly win?'

But for once he did not answer.

When after dinner that evening she announced her intention of going up to town for a few days, Hugh thought she was going to check on him. Her mother thought so too.

They were all in the drawing-room. Her father, the black sling round his arm making him look years younger, was working out matings for his hound bitches, and speculating on the possibilities of X and Z as initials for the year's puppies.

'I'm fed up with Ranter and Ringwood, Bellman and True,' he said. 'I want the classical touch. There's Xenophon and Ximenes, Xanthippe, Zany and Xerxes, and there I stop.'

Hugh said, 'Zoroaster, Uncle,' and sat down at the piano. He began to play, very softly, a Chopin nocturne, then ceased abruptly obliterating — was it memory? — with a sharp discord.

'Zephaniah,' he said. 'Zeus.'

Jean's mother looked up from her gros point at the discord. Her grave eyes rested imperceptibly on Hugh, and dropped to her work.

'Zebra, Matt dear,' she said.

Hugh made to get up from the piano.

'Do go on, dear,' she said. 'You've got such a nice touch.' Then — 'There's Zinnia, too, Matt,' she said, keeping the others amused so that Hugh and she were alone.

Hugh began again: a slow tune, formal yet passionate, that Jean thought she recognized. He was playing with a precision of phrasing that kept the heartbreak of the music in exact bounds. And that surprised her. Playing the piano was for him such a subjective affair that his discipline now was quite unexpected. He must have heard someone play it like that: someone he admired. Her mother conducted, with tiny movements of her embroidering needle.

Hugh stopped — at a cadence that was only a half close, a comma.

'I don't know any more, Aunt Bess,' he said. Jean knew he was lying.

Without looking up, her mother hummed the answering phrase. 'Such a romantic thing. It's Mozart, isn't it? The Violin Concerto.'

'In A,' Hugh said stiffly. 'Koechel Verzeichnis 219, transcribed by Hummel.'

There was a long, unbreathing pause — until Hugh abolished silence, swiftly and explosively: 'Zeno, Zenana, Xavier, Zillah, Zoe and ... Zeugma, Zagreus and Zaccheus — the man up the tree. Zephyr, Zubair.'

He had not taken his eyes off her mother's face. She had not looked up. Her mother threaded a needle with golden thread; said, bland, and vague, and ruthless: 'Do you ever see that girl you used to know, Hugh? The violinist, the girl with the odd, rather attractive name? Fennel?'

Surely her mother knew?

'Yes, Aunt Bess, I've seen her.' His voice was oddly non-committal, his face was surface-still, congealed like water over which the first spikes of ice were striking.

Her mother made three tiny golden stitches, smoothed the stitches with her fingers, stuck the needle in the pincushion, chose a thread of orange, twisted it.

'I liked her. A strange, rather elegiac little person, I thought. She had talent, too. Perhaps not very interested in life, in its comings and goings. Rather a self-destroying little person — in a nice way, of course.'

Hugh was still, as if not there.

'Zampa, Daddy,' said Jean, and then: 'By the way, I thought of going up to town tomorrow for a day or two, Mother.'

'Where will you stay? With Angela?'

Hugh stood up, said very casually: 'Why not stay with my father?'

It was a challenge, she knew that, though there was no note of bravado in his voice.

Her mother said, 'Is that very suitable, dear?'

Hugh said firmly: 'I'm sure Father would like it, Aunt Bess. He gets pretty lonely, I think.'

Jean suppressed a desire to tell him that if he really thought that, he had never seemed to do much about it.

Hugh left the room saying something about going upstairs for a book, deliberately giving them the opportunity to discuss him, to decide what they would say to his father, how far they should commit themselves to take sides, how far they should explain, or ask for explanations.

Her mother said ambiguously, 'Perhaps Aubrey wouldn't worry so much if you could tell him Hugh was well.'

Matthew Jegon grumbled: 'Aubrey worries out of a sense of duty. It's a religious obligation, like fasting.'

'That's settled, then,' Jean said.

'Dear Aubrey,' said her mother. 'You won't see much of him, dear. He'll be out painting. He is so dedicated, isn't he? He never has time for anything but painting, and perhaps worrying.' She looked at the piano stool and shook her head. 'Such a pity.'

When Hugh came back with his book they were listening to Matthew Jegon's hound list. He had abandoned the idea of X and Z. He was going to use V.

'Vortigern, Velox, Viper, Vengeance, Venom, Vindictive, Vandal, Vestal, Viking, Velocity, Vega.'

'It sounds like a flotilla of destroyers, Matt,' said Mrs Jegon.

'That's what they are, Bess.' He snorted: 'Zebra!'

Later, on their way upstairs to bed, Hugh caught Jean as she was going into her bedroom.

'Jean. Look, Jean, I'm not being secretive, but perhaps — well anyway, I mean I don't think this is such a good idea — you staying with my father.'

It was only what she had expected, but she was terribly disappointed.

'Afraid of what I shall find out?'

He shook his head, his eyes on hers.

'Then what's wrong?' she said.

'They'll think you're my ambassador. They'll only think I've put you up to it.' He ran a finger up the fluting of the column by the door. 'I don't want you to be an ambassador.'

'I shall tell them what I've told you. What you do with your own life is your business. You've behaved like a pretty good rotter, I think; but perhaps it was your only chance. You've been cruel and weak, and I don't see why you've had to do it at just this moment or in just this way; but I could have told you you'd do it, before you married her even.'

'I've made such a mess of things.' His voice was thin and self-reflecting.

'That's self-pity.'

'Is it?'

'You've known it for ages. It's not new — the mess. I thought the idea was to try and put it straight.'

'I suppose so.'

She could not stand there muttering to him all night.

'What makes you think we shall spend so much time talking about you?'

'I know my family,' he said, with sudden cheerfulness.

Since his wife's death Aubrey Maunt had lived with his sister Hilda in a vaguely Regency house in Blackheath. Jean drove in through two gateless pillars of yellow brick, past a peeling, clay-coloured balustrade guarding a shrubbery blasted and torn by neglect; and up an unkempt gravel drive that on its way towards the mock palladian porch enclosed a tussocky patch of grass.

She stood in the doorway. The plaster sweated with damp. Rain dripped from splitting seams of stucco. A bell jangled sharply below her feet, and immediately, almost as if someone had been waiting behind the door, it opened, and Hilda Maunt was there. Hilda held her cheek aside in a kiss, and unwilling to waste time in mere greeting, led the way in.

They moved through the hall; through a carpeted, muffled silence scented with lavender and floor polish and musk and

kitchen soap, into the sitting-room, dark and heavy with green plush tasselled curtains, gleaming mahogany overmantel and worn brocaded chairs. In contrast with the desolation outside, the house was drilled, and spotless, and ordered.

Seated, Hilda said — and it sounded like a reproof — ‘You’d like some tea, perhaps. I’m afraid I can’t offer you a cocktail. We don’t keep drink in the house. We live very simply here, you must remember. We’ll seem quite a backwater after Troy.’

It was a quarter past four.

‘I think tea would be nice, Aunt Hilda.’

Hilda sat forward on the edge of her chair; chafing her strong masculine hands together incessantly, as though to restore them to life. Painstakingly she asked about Jean’s journey, inquired after her parents.

‘How is Hugh?’ she said.

The words burst into the silence; yet Jean had an impression that Hilda was almost ashamed of asking.

‘He seems very well, Aunt Hilda. Very well. Very busy.’

‘He always liked being at Troy,’ Hilda said. ‘You’re so much grander than we. He likes that.’

Hilda’s knuckles showed white where her hands were gripped together. Her voice held the merest overtone of a sniff. She went on, with a brusqueness that was not unfriendly:

‘You’ve always had a soft spot for him, Jean. I remember once when you were children, you wanted to take a thrashing for him. He’d have let you. He was a conscienceless young rascal even then. I’ve often thought it might have been a good thing to let you do it. It might have been a lesson for you both.’

She looked up at the mantelpiece where there was a nest of photographs of Hugh: Hugh as a child; in a sailor suit; as a boy; as a young man.

She said, unwillingly: ‘I shouldn’t blame you, I suppose. He was such a dear little chap. So affectionate and sensitive, so sharp. Little Copper Nob.’

She smiled bleakly, with an unexpected clumsy charm.

'One had to love him. I think everyone loved him. Perhaps they loved him too much.'

Momentarily she drew her powerful hands together on her lap in a rather pathetic gesture — as if to enfold a child's hands, to draw him to her knee while she told him a story. Then she reddened. To discipline her hands for their weakness she parted them, putting them by her sides, gripping the chair arms where they rose out of the seat.

'That was a long long time ago, Jean,' she said. Then she changed the subject, and again it seemed like a reproof.

'I expect you'd like to wash after your drive,' she said. 'I'll show you your room, then I'll have tea ready for when you come down.'

Upstairs, in a little white attic, a tiny fire spluttered in the grate.

Hilda said: 'We don't usually have fires upstairs. But I thought after your journey ...'

She ran a finger along the brass bed-rail, looked at it for dust.

'You remember this room? It was Hugh's.'

She seemed to feel that must mean something to Jean, and she waited, as if for an answer.

At the door, she said: 'You must be careful not to shut yourself in.' She twisted the door knob twice, back and forth. 'The handle sticks.'

Then vehemently she burst out: 'Have you nothing to tell me, Jean?'

Jean looked puzzled.

Hilda went on, with a sneer, and a friendly, matter-of-fact tone to hide the sneer, 'Surely he's primed you with some story? Isn't that why you've come, to tell his lies for him?'

'I don't lie, Aunt Hilda,' said Jean angrily.

Hilda said, 'Perhaps I shouldn't have said that. But I think I'd rather hear a lie than this cruel silence. When he lies you know that he's ashamed.' One hand went to her greying hair — Jean thought she was going to cry, and was dismayed at the thought of that particular intimacy.

'He said he'd written to you, Aunt Hilda.'



Straightening, Hilda said: 'He wrote ... yes. A lot of vague phrases. But it didn't explain. You don't leave your wife — wantonly — without a word, unless there's a reason. Not even Hugh. That's too cruel and selfish, even for Hugh.'

'But you know Hugh is like that when things are too much for him,' said Jean. 'He just has to chop himself free, no matter who gets hurt. He feels trapped, and nothing matters but just getting free.'

A coil of grey hair slid down against Hilda's cheek; she drove it back into place with a finger. 'You're very loyal,' she said. She hesitated; then with a movement like a shiver, she squared her thin sloping shoulders and went on with her duty: 'Jean. He must have said something ... to justify.'

'We haven't asked, Aunt Hilda. I don't think we ask things much as a family. He's said nothing.'

Hilda bridled. 'He must have changed.'

'I think he has.'

Hilda steeled herself again. 'Nothing about ... Fennel?' Her voice was soft, and wheedling.

'Fennel?' Why did her own voice sound so defending?

'Fennel. She's behind it, Jean. As she has been behind everything since he first met her and lied to me about meeting her. All that business about the man being burned at the factory — the bribes there were supposed to be — setting himself up against his uncle — the time he left us before, going away without a word, to be a groom, or whatever it was. Now this. It's all her. She won't be content till she's dragged him down and ruined him.'

Jean said, unwisely: 'But you're quite wrong, Aunt Hilda. Fennel was besotted about him.'

'She doesn't know what love is. She is no better than a whore.' Hilda aspirated the word, like 'where': as though she had read it in the Bible and never heard it spoken. 'She lived with him as his wife though they were not married, Jean. Perhaps you did not know that.'

Jean did not say that she had known from the beginning, had always hoped that Hilda would never find out.

'That's lust, Jean. Not love, but lust.'

Quiet-voiced, eyes cast down, blushing with profound yet somehow voluptuous embarrassment, as though baring her body to a stranger, Hilda murmured, in quotation marks of sneers:

'“I imagine myself in your arms my love, my head in the hollow of your shoulder; your hand cups one of my breasts, and our legs are locked together, and then I can sleep even though you are not here” ... That, from a girl to a boy of nineteen! Jean, it's vile. Shameless.'

She did not seem to mind that it was obvious that she had been reading Fennel's letters to Hugh.

... The woman is demented with jealousy for Hugh. It's as if he had betrayed her, with Fennel. It would be bad enough if she were his mother ...

'No, Aunt Hilda. It's not.'

Hilda chafed her hands, met Jean's eyes. 'And now she's led him to betray his marriage with Evelyn,' she said in her quiet, embarrassed voice.

'Just like his mother — my Aunt Evie!' Jean said savagely. 'That's what you mean, isn't it, Aunt Hilda?'

Behind her eyes fixed on Jean's, Hilda drew herself erect.

'You're frank, Jean. I will be frank too. It was what we always feared, that weakness in his character. We have always tried to root it out. We have failed ...'

An alarm clock, wildly irrelevant in time, began to ring in a room beneath her feet, vibrating shrilly through the walls and floor.

Hilda said, 'Perhaps we were wrong to do that ...'

There did not seem to be any answer. After a long silence, Hilda dropped her eyes.

'I have cleared out the drawers and the cupboard,' she said. 'They're not very grand, I'm afraid; but I've put clean paper in the drawers.' She slipped out of the room.

Silence was where she had been; silence settling like dust. It was so still that Jean could hear the pulse throbbing in her ears.

But there was no quietness in the room. The house creaked, and

she had a sense that Hilda was still with her, that it was Hilda's listening heart she could hear. The fire sighed, and it was Hilda breathing. The room seemed to watch her. As once it must have watched Hugh. Like a conscience. Poor Hugh, he had to lie: only in lies could he find privacy.

Daylight faded, yellowed by smoke. The fire was almost out, there was no coal in the scuttle. So much for cosiness.

She went downstairs. Hilda made stilted small talk until they were both glad to give up the pretence, and sit in silence. Hilda excused herself to see to supper.

'We don't dine in the evening, I'm afraid, Jean,' she said reprovingly.

The front door opened and shut. A cycle was wheeled along the corridor outside. Aubrey Maunt came in.

'How's Jean?' he said. 'How's my little Jeannie? Caught any more Camberwell Beauties lately, little Jeannie?'

Once, as a child on holiday staying in Blackheath, she had taken a cabbage white butterfly to him. It was so pretty. Camberwell was near. Was it a Camberwell Beauty? He had teased her about it for twenty years. She wondered if he had ever noticed that she had grown up in the time.

He stood in front of the fire. His grey cropped hair stood upright like a lawyer's dusty wig, his thin nervous face, twisted with little bitter lines around his mouth and nostrils, was brown and weather-beaten like leather. In his face his eyes were still, as if frozen, a bright, unseeing blue. He took off a pair of mittens and stuffed them in his pocket. He swung his arms cabbywise, energetically.

'How are they all at Troy? And, since I am his father, how is my son?'

She said they were well. They sent their love. Hugh was well.

'Didn't he send his love too?' The tone was puzzled.

'He's working very hard, Uncle.'

'Is he? Is he now. It's about time, I suppose.' He sounded open-minded. 'But at what?'

'Helping Daddy with the estate, mostly.'

'I see.'

A taboo had been broken, she knew. With the words, something was shut off in Aubrey's blue eyes: a curtain was lowered, with a curiously arrogant effect of commanding that the conversation cease since the matter had been decided long ago and was immutable.

He rubbed the short hairs above his temple with a knuckled finger — an impatient and embarrassed fidget — and said kindly, 'Here, I must be off. While the light holds.'

He felt guilty if he did not have a brush in his hand. It was the physical act of painting that was important; yet he painted without enjoyment, it was a task, a duty, a decision made years before and stuck to. He painted as a Puritan might pray — in blood and tears; and the pictures he painted were as barren and forbidding as cactus in a desert.

He looked tired out. He smiled absently at her, and shook his head for some reason as he closed the door; and it was such a weary little gesture that for a moment she was wondering what it would have been like if her Aunt Evie had not left him ... if he had been happier, perhaps he would not have been such a perfectionist. If he had just let things come, she was thinking, perhaps it would not have turned out that even his painting had failed him (though he would never admit it).

He poked his head round the door, and as if it were something to be kept secret between them, said: 'You're a sensible girl, Jean. A young woman now, I suppose. What's the truth about all this business? I don't like to feel he's a rotter.'

'Oh, Hugh's all right, Uncle. I think it's just that he's taken rather a long time to grow up.'

'Do you? He wrote to us. Some highfalutin nonsense about thinking things out. Said he was staying with you, while you'd have him. Not a word about this girl. Yet Evelyn tells us he went off with her.'

'He said something about seeing her to say goodbye, Uncle.'

'Oh. I don't like to condemn him unheard.' He had opened the

door, was half-way through it. 'Tell him to come home, Jean. I'm his father. I only want to help him.' Then he was gone.

Hugh was not mentioned again directly, though Hilda seemed to keep bringing the talk round to things that could only be remembered in terms of him, and examining the silences and the answers that ensued, as if to gauge from any evasion how far Jean was implicated in whatever he might be up to now.

Next day, Jean was getting ready to go up to town to do her shopping, when Hilda appeared, to say goodbye — holding out a small package.

'Hugh left this behind once. It belongs to Fennel. It's a musical score. If you wouldn't mind dropping it in.'

Resenting Hilda's assumption of responsibility for Hugh's affairs, Jean said firmly, 'I'll give it to Hugh, Aunt Hilda.'

'I wanted you to take it to her,' said Hilda, with honeyed gentleness. 'We ought to know how she is. We must not be censorious.'

It was a trap, of course. Jean was angry.

'You'd like me to find out if Hugh's put her in the family way?'

Hilda's face flamed. 'How disgusting, Jean. If that is what you think, I shouldn't dream of letting you take it.' She held out her hand for the book.

'Oh, don't bother, Aunt Hilda. It's all right. I'll take it.'

But Hilda could not leave it at that. She added, 'One would think you had some reason not to see Fennel, Jean.'

Jean put the parcel in the shelf of the dashboard of the M.G. Everywhere she went, during the morning, the small, flat parcel was a reminder of a step in the dark she had been trapped into taking.

She was lunching at the Stores when she saw Evelyn by the door staring round the restaurant looking for her. She should have known better than to tell Hilda where she would be. Evelyn came to the table, pulled back a chair, sat, pulled it up to the table, and said: 'I was afraid you might have gone.' She took off her gloves, apparently symbolically, for she went on at once: 'I think you might have come over to see me.' Her voice was aggrieved.



'I must confess I don't see why.'

Evelyn said, 'He must have given you some message for me. I've got a right to know what his lordship proposes to do.'

Her voice had a faintly hectoring note which Jean decided it was best to ignore. Evelyn was usually prepared to run closer to making a scene than most women. She was like Hilda — always so justified.

Jean said firmly, 'We've all rather gone out of our way not to discuss it with him, I'm afraid.'

Evelyn said, 'Well, if he thinks he can go off with that girl and leave me in the lurch, he's got another think coming.'

The gloves beside her still kept the shape of her hands, like upturned pudgy paws; she ran a finger across the palms as if telling their fortune.

'It's not convenient,' she remarked with finality.

The absurd understatement, the tone of complete and righteous certainty in which it was spoken, were a clue, a glimpse of a mystery, that had puzzled Jean for nearly three years; the mystery why Hugh had ever married Evelyn.

... 'It is not convenient.' It was the sort of thing Hugh's father might say, said in exactly the tone of voice he would have said it in.

Evelyn was saying, 'Everything was all right, Jean. I was happy because there was some money at last. I thought he was. I know he was. Whatever he says.'

She pecked at her food like a child in the sulks.

'But it wasn't enough.' A tear dropped into her mashed potatoes. 'Nothing's ever enough. Just when he's getting somewhere he has to spoil it. He always has spoiled everything. He always will.'

The tears were shut off neatly, as if a dripping faucet had been screwed tight.

'I ought to have known,' Evelyn said. Hugh had come home one evening from the office. 'He looked half mad,' Evelyn said. 'His face all pale and sunken, and his eyes drawn back into his head as if he was dying. You know how he looks, Jean. Like a wild animal in a



cage — treacherous ... He'd seen her.' Evelyn could not bring herself to say Fennel's name. 'Not that he told me, and I didn't guess, at the time ... He knocked the bottom out of my world all right, that night.' Evelyn had believed he was contented in his job; now he told her he hated it. She had always managed his money. 'It gave me a lot of pleasure, and we got more for it than if his lordship had had it to fritter away.' That was to stop. It was too much like slavery, he said. He hated the flat. 'I'd made it so nice, and when I met him he didn't even have a proper suit, let alone a decent place to live.' Bit by bit, it seemed, he had dug up the foundations of their marriage, and destroyed them.

'All the things I'd done to help him, he turned them all round. He made them so hateful, turning them against me — as if I'd been a gaoler or something. But you've got to be firm with him, Jean. He takes advantage if you're not firm. Anyway, when we got the commission from that big paint deal we were going to have a New Deal, he said, as if he was God. We were going to live. Live in the country like labourers or something. I don't know. Only we'd got to get away from it all. Quickly.' She sighed, cut an exaggeratedly small piece of meat and swallowed it whole. 'It isn't that I'd have minded the country. We could have had a little cottage and he could have come up to business every day. I'd have been quite happy like that. But not without any money coming in. Do you blame me? ... He said — all pompous — "Life comes before money."'

Jean nodded. 'I know that mood. It is quite infuriating.'

Feeling she had made her point, Evelyn conceded, 'It's not as if I don't know what the country means to him. You're gentry, after all, Jean, and he's got that in his blood. It's his life, horses and things. But you can't throw everything to the winds ... He went on about it for weeks — on and on. Then suddenly he stopped. Perhaps he's seen sense, I thought, and he'll get over it. Then one night he came in. I thought he was ill. He had that starved look. I got him a nice supper, and after, I wanted him to go to bed, he looked so poorly. But he wouldn't go ... He'd had a letter. There was a cottage

for sale on some island in Scotland. There wasn't water or gas or electricity, but there were two acres, and fishing, and we could live off the land, he said. If I really loved him, he said, I'd up sticks and go with him. At once. Then he'd know I loved him because I'd be trusting him ... But' — she sounded quite frantic — 'if we'd bought it there would only have been a hundred pounds to keep us. Suppose one of us had been ill ... He said "I understand." As if he ever understood anything. In the morning when he went to the office he said, "You're quite sure about the cottage?" So I said, Quite sure. And I haven't set eyes on him from that day to this. He didn't even take a bag.'

She arranged plum-stones round her plate. This year, next year, some time, never.

'If he'd only told me there was someone else, I'd have let him go. I would, Jean, I'm sure. But he'd said there wasn't. I'd asked him. He promised there wasn't anybody at all — I believed him, Jean.'

She poured salt from the salt-cellar on to the tablecloth; stared at it; took a pinch, and threw it over her shoulder.

'What a mug I was. They'd been meeting for weeks. He'd worked it all out so as to put me in the wrong; so that he could go to her, and it would be all my fault.'

There was nothing to say. Evelyn thought Hugh had been trumping up a pretext to leave her. It was probably true. But the opposite was just as likely. Just as desperately he might have been trying to find a way never to leave Evelyn. He must have needed her so very badly to have been so cruel.

The waitress came with the bill. Evelyn insisted on paying her share and half the tip, finding the exact money to a penny, hovering by the cash desk as Jean paid.

'If he'd been in love with her, I wouldn't have minded so much. I'd have known I'd failed, and I'd have got on with it. It would have been a pity, but I'd have felt it was something he couldn't help.'

She picked at a nail. 'He's not in love with her. He never was. It's one of his excuses. For not getting on with life in a proper manner. She flatters his ego or whatever you call it, and makes him feel he is

noble and fine. She's the great violinist and he's practically a duke. It's not fair, Jean.' Her voice rose. 'She's only a fiddler in a café.'

By the car, Evelyn stood looking down at the licence-holder, trying to twist it so that the writing stood horizontal.

Jean turned the key in the ignition switch. 'She's more than that, Evelyn,' she said. 'I've heard her play. She's very good. And in other things too, she's more than you say. I've a lot of time for Fennel.'

'Wait until the money's gone,' Evelyn said. 'You can't be the sort of man he thinks he is without money, and the sort of man he thinks he is doesn't work for it, because he's got it already. Wait till the money's gone. She'll find the real Hugh then.' Her eyes were heavy with tears, though her voice was resentful.

Jean said sharply: 'If it helps, Evelyn, Hugh told me that he had said goodbye to her for good.'

Evelyn shook her head, miserably. 'Then why did he leave me?' She looked up, her face made alive by fear. 'He's not in trouble, is he, Jean?'

The words Jean's father had used.

'What sort of trouble?'

'No, that's silly. Only I did wonder ... you know that big sum of money ... I rang the firm ... it can't be that ...'

Then very prosaically: 'But would you tell him something? From me? Would you tell him if he comes back I'm willing to let bygones be bygones. We can start again. If he'll only try. Whatever he's done. If he tells me the truth.'

'Of course, but why not write and tell him yourself?'

Evelyn shook her head. 'He'd listen if you told him. He likes you,' she said.

Jean let the clutch in too fast; as the car jerked, the parcel fell on the floor. She turned the car towards Hampstead, and Fennel's flat.

As she drove, she tried to concentrate on what Evelyn had told her. But there was a queer time-lag between the things she had heard, and her feelings about them. Her thoughts were restless and sad, and she could not come to grips with the facts.

Why had Hugh not gone away with Fennel?

No one could ever really understand Hugh's moments of defeat. One could only guess at the panic that caused his swift disintegrating withdrawals.

A policeman held up the traffic. A nursemaid in brown wheeled a pram with golden-haired twins. A red ball bounced in the gutter.

The policeman beckoned her on. She swung out of the stream, down a side street, turning south towards Blackheath.

It was an act of faith. Yet when Hilda asked her if she had delivered the parcel to Fennel, she said she had. Perhaps it was impossible to tell the truth to Hilda; her unconscious got in the way.

The next day she went home to Troy. Her father and mother were to be away for the night, and she had a notion that left alone, Hugh would go out for an evening's drinking in Littlehampton or Worthing. It was one of his snobberies to say that he preferred being alone, but it was the act of going away from people, not the state of being away, that he liked.

She did not want to spoil his fun, so she did not leave Blackheath until after ten, driving down by moonlight to reach Troy about midnight. But when she got home the light was still on in her father's workroom, and Hugh was busy with the accounts.

He greeted her, with an odd constraint as if he was not sure how she would feel towards him after the things she must have heard.

'Have a good journey?'

She nodded.

'How's my parent?'

'Fine. Very well. He sent you his love.'

'Good.' Then he said, 'Fine.'

And then he did not say any more. He did not ask about Evelyn or Hilda. Instead he told her about Moonraker's progress, and their doings since she had gone up to town.

'Come and tuck him up for the night.'

They went out into the frosty, unflawed moonlight. She shivered, and Hugh, slipping back into the house, came out with a coat to put round her shoulders. The coat was much too small for her, it

smelt slightly of rubber; rubber and dust and old sunlight. It was not hers; it was just an old dusty coat that had hung in the lobby for so long no one remembered who had left it there. To fetch it was a small boy's thoughtfulness rather than a man's; but laughing at him about it, she lost her feeling of shyness.

After they had seen Moonraker, put fresh water in the bucket in his stall, and shut him up, they went out to the orchard. Far away an engine puffed and stopped and started; trucks chuntered repetitively. A barn owl quartered the hedgerows like a great vindictive moth.

Hugh asked, 'What did Evelyn say?'

She told him what Evelyn had said, and Hilda.

He said harshly, 'It's all true.' There seemed no point in hiding it, and the book was in her pocket. She had unwrapped it to extract the poison, should Hilda have written a letter. In the moonlight the black lettering of the title was clear against the shining yellow boards:

W. A. MOZART — VIOLIN CONCERTO IN A MAJOR

'Hilda wanted me to take this. I think she wanted some kind of report on Fennel.'

Hugh turned the score over in his hand, whistled a couple of bars of the *adagio*, and stopped.

'I didn't go,' she said.

He took her hand, twined his fingers through her fingers; swung their interlinked hands slowly up and down; lifted them so that they were like hands raised in prayer; let them fall.

'Perhaps you should have gone,' he said.

He released her hand, stood still, with the waiting animal stillness that she had come to dread, and, without shock, or surprise, or emotion — it was an acceptance of something long known rather than a new knowing — she found she knew that Fennel was dead: and that in some way Hugh had accepted responsibility for her death.

It was a quite transient illumination. She accepted it as true, yet



at the moment of acceptance, it seemed to slide away into unknowing; as if it were quite unimportant; as though it would stop if she were to think about it.

It must still be his secret, even though she knew.

She took his hand again, twined her fingers through his, put their two hands in the pocket of her coat.

'I'm glad I didn't,' she said.

He stared into the moonlight. 'It was always Fennel, Jean,' he said slowly. 'Only I didn't know.'

It seemed such an odd thing to say.

Two days later, Moonraker savaged Hugh.

6 Indignant and puzzled, Jake told her about it when they were in the doctor's waiting-room.

'He went into Moonraker's stall, Miss Jean. Usually we go in together — you know that — but I never thought of anything happening now. Then I heard the horse scream and Mr Hugh saying, so quietly, "Give me a hand, Jake, to get out, 'e's got me." He was holding his arm, and he'd got a whip in his 'and and Moonraker was backing away to come at him again. All the old capers.' Then he added: 'Proper colt's trick, taking a whip into Moonraker's stall, I don't know what come over him. Said he wanted to see if we'd made any improvement in his character.'

Later, Hugh told her a different story. He said he had just had a whip in his hand by chance, and had forgotten. That she did not believe, and wondering why he should have lied, said idly, 'Did you want Moonraker to kill you off or something?'

'Jean, no,' and he stammered so that the word trailed echoes: 'no-no-no-no.'

There was not much damage. The muscles of his forearm were badly bruised and there was a good deal of superficial bleeding



where Moonraker's teeth had torn the flesh. Only four or five stitches were needed. The doctor told him not to ride for a week and advised him to keep the arm in a sling.

Outside the doctor's house, when he realized that only the three of them knew, he said, 'Silly old fool,' and took off the sling.

Though the injury must have been quite painful, he managed to behave as if nothing had happened. Jean had to dress it night and morning; there indulgence ceased. He exercised Moonraker; he even played the piano for Jean's mother in the evening. He never attempted to favour the injured arm. He behaved as if it had never happened; and curiously, so did the horse. Moonraker appeared to have forgotten. He remained as docile and obedient with Hugh as with Jake.

In the mornings Hugh worked with Moonraker. In the afternoons he worked for his uncle. Jean would walk or ride with him across the downland to the farms to look over faulty drains, leaky roofs, barns and outbuildings and pig-sties, or to bargain over stock or silage.

He was popular with the tenants, especially with their wives and mothers. Jean was surprised how good he was with them, and a little bewildered that he should be so expert. She had expected him to be patronizing or familiar in his desire to be liked, perhaps to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds; or to promise, and fail to carry out his promise. At the very most she had expected him to show a burst of energy, sweep clean like a new broom, and slowly lapse into carelessness. Instead, he was patient, quite surprisingly definite and firm, and very fair. He showed a gay obstinacy in bargaining, that was an excellent foil to the tenants' stubborn Sussex shrewdness. But he heard their complaints out to the end. What he promised, he got for them; what they promised, he saw that they did.

She mentioned it once.

'Jean, it's just learning a language by the direct method.'

'What language?'

'The one everyone talks,' he said airily.

'How do you know about leys and wheat varieties?'

'That's just book larnin',' he said.

He spent the afternoon before the race in going over his racing clothes and saddlery. He was a stone under weight, so he was wearing ordinary leather boots, and using a hunting saddle instead of lighter racing tack. He took as much trouble over his racing clothes as a guardsman for a ceremonial parade, using the cloth-bail, until his breeches were spotless, boning his boots until they shone like glass.

She was sitting by the schoolroom fire watching him, when her mother came in with a parcel. She had knitted him a jersey in Matthew Jegon's racing colours, primrose and apple green. She had reworked the black-barred silken primrose cap.

'I was so worried, dear, thinking you might have gone to the expense of buying new silks. But I wanted it to be a surprise.'

Hugh had to try them on, of course. He stripped to his singlet and put on the jersey, teasing Mrs Jegon gently, because as always, she found him thin. When the jersey was fitted to her satisfaction, she stood back to admire her handiwork. Hugh thanked her gravely. She smiled, pulling his head down to kiss him.

'I hope they bring you luck, Hugh. You deserve it. I do hope Moonraker will behave, dear. He will, though. He's always been your horse really.'

When he stripped off the jersey, her mother tapped his forearm, where the new skin was red and crinkled among the scars and stitches.

'You're not going to show him the whip again, tomorrow?'

Hugh, unguarded, looked surprised. Her mother nodded.

'There's not much you can keep from your Aunt Bess, Hugh. I've known you — and loved you — since you were a tiny baby; perhaps that helps, too. No one told me; I've told no one. But I know. You're too mature to do things like that now.' She patted his arm. 'There, let's forget all about it, dear. It was just my vanity that I wanted you to know that I knew; that I understand.' Her voice dropped to a comic stage whisper. 'I didn't tell Uncle, dear.'

She tidied the clothes on the table — she could not pass a table without tidying it; said Hugh needed an early night; went out.

Hugh looked at Jean.

'Everybody always knows about me,' he said. 'I'm quite transparent. I wonder I ever bother to lie.'

She asked why he had done what he had, and he answered, without constraint:

'It was just damned silly. I knew that, while I was doing it. But I couldn't help it.'

His voice was free of drama or self-pity.

'I had to do it.'

He wants to know about it himself, Jean thought.

'I'd been wondering what I'd do on the day if I needed to scrape the barrel,' he said. 'I'd decided that if the worst came to the worst, the whip would be best. Make him stride out even if he cut up afterwards. This sounds fantastic, but as soon as I'd decided, I felt dishonest — dirty — because the whole thing was, we had persuaded Moonraker we'd never use the whip again — no matter what ... God knows why; I was in a lather about it, Jean. Came a bit near the bone, I expect. I suppose this all sounds pretty funny. Funny haha! I mean.'

'Side-splitting.'

For a long time he stared through the window, waiting until a fly crawling across came up to a line between the blind cord and the lightning conductor of the church steeple. When he spoke, it was as if a ventriloquist were speaking through him: as though he were standing aside to let a voice speak.

'I'd left my coat in his stall, I went in to get it. I was inside before I really realized I'd still got the whip in my hand — though I must have known. Then I was scared because my thoughts were coming true. Because I'd done such a silly thing. I don't know. When Moonraker came at me, screaming — he was quite berserk — I was terrified. I was damned if I was going to throw the whip away. That was part of it. I dodged him as best I could. But I let him get me into a corner — I think just because I was really frightened. I can't explain.'

He swung round to the table, breathed on the shining toe of a boot, and gently rubbed away the mist of breath.

'Mind if I tell you something?' he said. 'It's a bit ridic. You see ... even when I was a kid I'd got it all worked out, that I was different from other people because I wasn't afraid of death ... not of dying. It couldn't be worse than living. It's all done — finish — that's that — and a good job too.'

He sat the boot down beside the other in the strict position of attention: the toes at an angle of forty-five degrees.

'It was rather fun. I knew I'd got the edge on people because I'd always go one step nearer the edge than they would.'

He straightened. He was staring at her like an old, tired medium in a trance. He brushed a speck of grime off a saddle flap, and murmured, 'As though death were the safest place to hide.' He straightened the saddle on the table, ran his hand round the lining gently.

'This time' — he snapped his fingers — 'I didn't have that any more. This was different, this was not minding being hurt so long as I wasn't going to be killed. I didn't mind about being savaged, or hooves smashing in my skull. I remember I noticed the near fore wanted shoeing, and thinking that was the one to be careful of. But I was in a panic because it might be the end.' He added lightly, 'As if I'd got urgent reasons for staying alive.'

'People do have,' she said.

'Not me.'

Hugh sucked in his breath with a click, then sighed — or rather, he stopped holding his breath.

'The only point of life is living it,' he said with his eyes averted. 'Going on.'

He picked up his gear, packed it neatly in his suitcase, tied saddle, weight cloth, whip and helmet in their canvas bag; labelled them.

'Pompous ass,' he said. Then: 'Let's go and watch old Venus put on Moonraker's racing plates.'

She saw him briefly at breakfast next morning. He looked pale and preoccupied, and of set purpose on edge: as if he could control

his nerves if he wanted to, but preferred not to for fear of creating too much tension in himself — or, as he would have said, for fear of bad luck.

The horse box drove past the window. He left his breakfast hardly touched, to go and oversee. Jake, looking piratical in a bowler hat and surprisingly well cut breeches, was holding Moonraker's head when they got into the stable yard.

The black horse moved nervously, breaking out into a sweat under his blanket as Jake led him towards the van. Jake whispered and gentled him, walking him round the van; then, quiet and docile, the horse walked up into the box.

Hugh said, 'Jake's a magician with that horse.'

The horse lashed out with his hind legs against the sides of the box. Jake quietened him. He lashed out again.

'E knows what's doing,' Jake said. 'He ain't staled yet.'

Hugh said, 'Jean, I'm going with them. Lend me a couple of pounds. I've got to declare him ... there'll be a tip for the valet ... better be on the safe side ... can you make it a fiver?'

'Haven't you any money?' she said automatically.

He grinned. 'A little silver.'

The van drove off. She wondered how much he stood to lose.

The Charlton Club meeting was always a great date in her father's calendar. He always had the drag out, driving the four chestnuts himself, wearing a grey topper and buff box-coat complete with carnation, his whip gay with ribbons of his racing colours. Not only his friends, but his tenants as well, would join him. There were seats for the folk of the estate in the waggonette and the brake, and a barrel of beer in the hall, and mountains of pies and sandwiches as 'cogers', for any who cared to come and visit him that day.

It was a tradition, a social obligation to the village that he was proud to be able to honour. He felt that most traditions were Victorian and middle-class humbug, dishonest propaganda for an England that was a rentier's dreamland where a docile genteel peasantry touched their caps to their wealthier and genteeler



betters, who had long ago ceased to have any responsibility for them. 'I'll play at being squire,' he would say, 'when I find a nice eighteenth-century mob to smash my windows and set my ricks on fire.' But on race day, as at Christmas, and Harvest Thanksgiving, and the Puppy Show, he was 'Squire' to the village, even when they talked among themselves. Other days he was 'sir' to his face, but the 'Ol Maester', or 'dat ol' Jegon', behind his back. He liked it that way.

However, this time, all the grave fuss of hospitality — the decent greeting of his guests, the sherry in the best Waterford, the beer in tankards, the sandwiches — seemed to bore him.

Jean's mother said, poised between one guest and another, between a thought and a social smile, and with a glance at her husband: 'So provoking, Hugh having to dash off with Moon-raker' — and Jean knew her father felt Hugh had let him down.

The village had backed Hugh heavily, and Hugh should have borne his part in the ceremonies of wishing luck. Her father felt his absence was a dereliction of duty, and when they set out for the races he made a rather transparent excuse to have Jean on the box beside him rather than one of his guests, and she guessed he had meant Hugh to sit there.

They drove through the village.

'Looks damned empty,' he grunted. 'They're all off at the races. Idle fellows.'

Still, there were mothers to hold up their babies to 'wave to the pretty coachman', old men and boys to eye the turnout like connoisseurs, and the landlord of the Labouring Boys to give a stentorian yell: 'Good luck t'y Squire. And to Maester Hugh.'

They turned on to the Lewes road. Her father sat brooding over the reins in a kind of controlled and gentle melancholy, then he said:

'Do you know that boy hasn't hedged a bet?'

She nodded.

'You've got to admire his guts,' Matthew Jegon said slowly, then paused. 'What's on the card if he doesn't win?'



'I don't know, Daddy.'

She sat beside him thinking about Hugh and the race, and his impossible dream of making the past come true. The rhythm of sixteen hooves trotting, of harness swaying, singletrees bobbing, chains glinting, and the grating spinning-wheel hum of wheels turning, wove a web around her thought: until the thought was only a tension at the heart of a delicate and complex rhythm, was lulled away, ceasing to be a thought — lost in the physical awareness of cheeks icy with tears blown from her eyes by the wind; of nostrils tingling with the cold scent of air; of the countryside turning past them, dull green and rutted brown, flecked with the brightness of new grass, gold crocuses, and the green mist on the branches of the trees.

'Spring's early this year,' her father said suddenly. 'The going'll be heavy.' He said no more until they turned into the wide gravelled drive of the race-course.

To let the drag pass, the crowds parted, dead leaves hurrying on a wind. When they were clear, Matthew Jegon whipped up the horses, driving round in style to take his place with the other coaches on the rails opposite the winning post. Charles led off the horses to feed and stable them.

Going through the bookies' ring Jean asked a price for Moonraker, and was stupidly disappointed to find he was going out in the betting. Yesterday with difficulty she had got sevens, making a bet on Hugh's behalf with her bookie in town; and now the price was seventeen to two; at one stand it was nines. Hugh's whole scheme depended on spreading the bets so that the price never shortened; but when she actually got nines against a two pound bet, she had a feeling that she was doing something very silly.

'Two lovely new pahnnd notes for the lady, on Moonraker — eighteen to two — to win.'

To keep her spirits up, and just because, she put on two pounds more.

'To win, miss?'

She nodded. The bookie was giving her the ticket, when Hugh

hailed her across the ring. He looked tormented; very frail and small in a greatcoat over his racing things. He was armoured in a brittle exuberance of words, talking very fast about the going, the other riders. A great swell was down, who had won the Grand Military. He was riding the favourite.

The clerk-of-the-scales office had taken a pretty low view of Moonraker's entry, but they had contented themselves with an awful warning. He had walked round the course. The going was marvellous.

'My father's here.' His voice was thin; experimental. 'He's in the paddock — sketching.'

'Did you speak to him?'

He nodded. With a sort of naive eagerness — and so shyly, as if the thing were too flattering to be believed — he said, 'He must have come on purpose. Do you think he came on purpose, Jean?'

Somehow, in that context at least, it did not seem very likely, but she nodded. 'What did he say?'

'Oh, that there was a lot we ought to talk about, but perhaps it was not the moment. And he said he wished me whatever I needed, to come to terms with my dreams. But then he smiled, and said I could call it luck if I liked.'

He hesitated.

'Then he said something else.'

His voice was quite different: misty, as if even the refractive value of the words had changed.

'He said — I was getting to look awfully like Mother.'

Suddenly he was looking at her very directly, very straightforwardly. He said, 'It's the first time he's ever mentioned her. To me.'

Then he said, very matter-of-factly, 'Funny. I've only just realized something. It's hardly surprising, in the circs — is it? But I used to think he was hiding something from me.'

She took his arm. 'You live and learn,' she said.

After the first race he began to yawn with nerves. When the

horses came under starter's orders for the second race, he slipped away to the paddock.

Her father said, 'Mind how you go, Hugh.'

'Now or never, Uncle.'

Her father walked a step or two with him. When he came back he said, 'I still don't trust that horse.'

When the mounting-bell for the third race rang, Hugh must have been ready for a long time. He came out of the paddock gate under the trees on to the course a good minute before the others, cantering Moonraker gently past them, going down towards the starting post, waving as he passed.

From the top of the drag they could see the starting post very clearly. Hugh was keeping Moonraker away from the shifting line of horses, holding him a good three yards behind the others, at an angle, as if the whole thing did not concern him.

There was a lot of delay. Through her race-glasses Jean could see Hugh and Moonraker turning away again and again from the line of jockeying horses. Then abruptly he swung the horse round, and took his position just behind the line of horses moving steadily up.

The crowd sighed.

'They're off!'

Splintering colours like thrown confetti, the horses surged forward out of sight into the dip. Hugh had gauged his run beautifully. Though fair enough, it was a trick — she knew. You watched the starter's eye; not his hand. It gave you a fraction of a second.

Then Jake was standing beside her.

'He's going to wait out in front, if he can get there before the turn, Miss Jean,' he said. 'If not, he'll try and come through here or hereabouts, on the first time round. It's best for him to be in front.' Jake fidgeted with his numbered arm-band. 'He said to say if you'd come and lead him in? You and me, one on each side, Miss Jean. Ones that he knows, if you follow my meaning.'

'If he wins, Jake ...'

'Touch wood and spit,' Jake said. He slipped under the rails, and was gone.

She turned back to the race. They had reached the water, which thinned out the field a little. Moonraker took the jump as if it were a cart-rut; but he was boxed in by the leaders, and Hugh was fighting him to hold him back. Somehow, he managed to keep behind until the turn, and then, as Jake had said, Hugh gave the horse his head, turning him sharply as the other runners swung in a wide arc.

Once in front, Moonraker would not be checked. They stormed past the drag, five lengths ahead of the field, the favourite lying comfortably back, fifth.

When they went out into the country again, Hugh stopped fighting. He sat still, letting the horse run its own race.

Matthew Jegon walked back from the turn.

'Suppose he knows best,' he said. 'But Moonraker's running himself into the ground.' He sounded apologetic.

When the horses came round for the second time, Hugh was still in the lead; Moonraker was tiring noticeably, and Majlis the favourite was creeping up slowly.

At the turn Majlis was only a neck behind. When they came to the jump, Hugh tried to half-length him. Taking advantage of his position and the fact that Moonraker always jumped so big, he gave the horse the office a stride before he should have taken off, trying to prompt Majlis to do the same and fail — but Majlis's jockey did not bite.

Moonraker overstretched, and stumbled on landing. He recovered, but the jerk had interrupted the rhythm of his stride. He swung almost unbalanced across the course, and Majlis slipped into the lead, on the inside. But Moonraker pounded on, and caught Majlis at the last fence. They took the fence 'topsides' stride for stride, though Moonraker's longer stride landed him with his nose just in front.

Jean was whispering, 'Oh let him win. Please let him. Oh God, please let him win.'

The two horses raced neck and neck down the straight: Majlis ahead, then Moonraker, then Majlis, Majlis all the way, drawing slowly ahead ... the fresher horse.

They had fifty yards to go, when Hugh used the whip. Twice.

Two sharp cracks, sounding through the broken thunder of hooves.

Matthew Jegon said, 'God!'

Moonraker hurled himself forward into the bit, moving in a wild surge; caught Majlis, passed Majlis, was home by a head; then was racing on blindly down the course, going on wildly, dementedly away, away.

'Good God, he's bolted!' old Dalby said pompously. 'Extraordinary thing — most extraordinary thing I've seen in my life. After four miles he's bolted. Young jackanapes. You'll never get another race out of that horse, Jegon.'

Jean's father said coldly, 'I thought the boy rode a very good race.'

'Of course!' Dalby said, boisterous and pacific. 'He's won. That's my answer, eh Jegon?'

Jean slipped under the rails. She looked at her father, as if for permission, and he said, 'Of course,' as if that was what he wanted.

Her mouth was dry and her lips were trembling, and the trembling of her lips was making her want to cry. She was aware of Jake and a policeman waiting on the opposite side of the course, and a small boy jumping up and down, and his voice, detached from the mutter of the crowd, came clear: 'Mummy, the black horse won! Mummy it won! — the black horse! Mummy, why is the black horse still running, Mummy?'

But she was isolated in a cold loneliness of fear. Now that it was all over, she was afraid. Afraid of Moonraker, afraid of Hugh, of his success, of the thing unknown that would destroy that success.

Her father said, 'All right, old lady?'

A flake of turf slipped slowly down the walls of a hoofprint at her feet.

Moonraker was sidling towards her, his ears back, as Hugh turned him to face the crowd, fidgeting with his bit, foam-flecked and wild, and gigantic. In her coat pocket was a peppermint; to postpone the moment when she must take the bridle, she gave it to the horse, who nosed it.

Hugh said wearily, 'It's no good waiting. Let's get on.'

She took the bridle and started to walk the horse towards the crowd.

The policeman yelled: 'Room please. Mind please. The Winner.' Jake had organized it very well, and another policeman appeared, to help fend off the crowd.

They reached the unsaddling enclosure. Jake said, 'I'll chat him. You get off quick with saddle and cloth while I chat him.'

Hugh dismounted, loosed the girths, took saddle and weight cloth, irons and leathers, and slipped away behind the horse out of sight. The horse made no movement when Jake crossed him with a rug.

They walked the horse up and down the paddock, waiting, waiting for something to begin again, waiting to rejoin the muffled, misty world poised outside them. Moonraker grew restless, prodding at Jake with his head.

Jake halted the horse and ran a hand underneath the blankets and shook his head.

'Worrying never hatched an egg, Miss Jean, but he's up to something.'

Later, Hugh joined them in the boxes. In his hands he was carrying the Cup. It was filled with stout. He came towards the loose box.

Jake said, 'Half a mo while I catch a holt of him.'

'You can't hold him for ever. It's got to be some time.'

The horse's ears went back at the sound of his voice, and he swung round, head raised in the way Jean thought of as his 'killing' attitude, and waited.

Hugh elbowed the half-door open. He still held the Cup in his hands.

Jake hissed: 'Let me hold that while ...'

Hugh snarled, 'Shut up.' He held out the Cup to Moonraker, and stood quite still.

A long way off a bookie called the odds — and there was a muffled sense of movement outside. That was all. Inside, it was very quiet.



Jean found herself praying that there should be no sudden sound from outside to break the tension of that quiet.

Hugh laughed. 'This is very stupid,' he said, and turned his back on the horse, and held the Cup out to Jean over the half-door. 'We'll make it a loving cup, only Moonraker's such a messy drinker. You first, Jean.'

She could not take it. She was watching the horse.

'You first Jean,' Hugh commanded.

He watched her with a sad intentness, as she sipped and passed the Cup to Jake. She tried not to look at the horse. She did not understand; but in some curious way they were together making a spell, a spell that could heal, if only it were properly cast. They must do it right.

Jake drank in silence, afterwards polishing with his handkerchief the rim where he had drunk.

Hugh drank. Turned to face the horse. Held out the Cup. He did not speak. Moonraker backed into a corner. Reared. Stood still, as Hugh came forward. Then, slowly, he stretched out his head, butted the chased silver Cup with his nose; whinnied, and lapped noisily.

Jake and Hugh laughed uproariously.

'He likes his wallop, does Moonraker,' Jake said.

'You saw, Jean, didn't you?' Hugh said. 'It can be done. I'm sure.' Was he talking about the horse?

The men discussed arrangements for transport and feeding, and Jean noticed that Jake was calling Hugh 'sir', and she was suddenly conscious that the relationship between them all had changed. A week ago she would have been humbly grateful that someone else should mark a change in Hugh, and honour him and accept his leadership. Now it was a fact, not a hope; and she was amused at the stupid rationalizations men found for their respect. Jake and Hugh rubbed the horse down. Then Hugh glanced at her, saw her shivering, and without fuss abdicated.

'You can finish him off, Jake, can't you?' He could not have said that even yesterday.

Jake nodded. Hugh took her arm.

'I should have thought.' He hesitated. 'Jake, when you've rugged him up, you'll come over, won't you?'

Jake straightened, grinning. 'I've got some visits to make.'

Hugh shook his head. 'Later,' he said.

Jake said, 'Best not.'

Jean chipped in, 'Oh Jake, you're the trainer. You're part of it.'

'Please come, Jake.'

Jake said, 'I don't mind, if Squire doesn't.'

Outside, the paddock was full of horses and riders mounting for the fifth race. Hugh slipped an arm through hers in an absent-minded gesture of affection.

He was going to speak, then shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'No.' And then his silence was part of the chilly mist, isolating them from the world and from each other.

She said, 'Cryptic. "No." Is that how it feels, to get your heart's desire?'

Hugh kicked at the torn turf. 'I was thinking.' He trod down a flaking sliver of turf with a golfer's care. 'Funny you should say about heart's desire ... I was thinking — that was the trouble. I never admitted I'd got one.' He hesitated. 'That's so terribly selfish. It's scratching before the race.'

What he was saying obviously meant far more to him than the words conveyed. He was still-faced, and his eyes were listening as if he did not know about the thought until it had been spoken.

'It's only through your heart's desire that you can reach anybody — or they can reach you. I didn't know that before,' he said. 'It's your stake money. You've got to choose if you're going to communicate ... if you're going to love.'

He looked at her with a kind of passionate enthusiasm, as if he had received some profound illumination.

Then he laughed.

'Have you a problem? Miss Lonelyhearts can help you.'

When they reached the coach, Jean caught a glance from her

mother's eye, and while Hugh climbed up on the box seat to get the champagne, she moved over to her.

Her mother exclaimed, with deft conversational duplicity: 'Such a pity, dear, you've just missed Evelyn. She's only just this moment gone. So smart she looked.' She might just as well have said 'so unsuitably dressed', and been done with it. 'She seemed upset not to have seen Hugh. Quite upset, dear.'

Jean took her cue. 'Where is she, Mother?'

'She said she would be back. She was going to find Aubrey. I'm sure you'd catch her if you went to the enclosure, dear.'

Her mother's glance sought out Hugh. 'Dear Hugh,' she said.

Jean balked. She was damned if she was going to do Hugh's dirty work at her mother's bidding. 'Hugh will want to know, Mother,' she said.

Mrs Jegon said, 'So tiresome of Timey not to put in more glasses.'

After a while, Jean got Hugh alone.

'Evelyn's here,' she said. 'Mother's just come over all Edwardian hostess, and told me to warn you. She's in the enclosure.'

Hugh's mouth and eyes crinkled in a perfect imitation of a smile.

'Of course,' he said.

Jean snapped. 'You and Mother are a pair.'

'Have you been round the bookies, Jean?'

She shook her head. 'I've got to collect four hundred pounds in cash. There'll be a cheque from my bookie for three sixty at the end of the week. Hugh ... you're not going to give her that money?'

'She's got to live, Jean. Even if I don't want her to live with me.'

'But you've just given her five hundred.'

He shook his head obstinately. 'It's what she wants. Money.'

'I wonder if you're right ... It's cheating, too. The money's as necessary to you as to her. They're separate things—money to buy things with, money as a feeling. If money is important enough to give away, it's important enough to be careful about.'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'It's not.'

She said, in a savage undertone: 'No, you'd rather fling round

largesse. Because that way you can despise the people you give it to. Then they can't reach you.'

He said, 'No ... no, Jean.'

'It's true, my lad. Are you going back to her?'

He shook his head.

'Then leave her her pride.'

He looked at her so oddly; said, 'Thank you'; straightened. 'I'll go and get it over.'

She relented. 'I'll walk over with you,' she said. 'To make tactful noises. I'll fade away when the ice is broken.'

They met Evelyn and Aubrey in the Silver Ring. As they came up they heard Aubrey saying, in aggrieved tones, 'You can't have had much faith in your choice, to back it to lose as well as win,' and an embarrassed Evelyn was trying to explain 'both ways' to him.

He greeted them as if they were children to be entertained for a free moment as he passed.

Evelyn said, 'Hullo Jean.' She looked at Hugh. After a pause, she said, 'Your race — it was exciting.'

Hugh picked at a finger-nail, and realized what he was doing just as Evelyn said, 'Don't Hugh.' He jammed his hands down into his pockets, and stood looking defiant — sulky and scared as a small boy.

Evelyn said, 'Did you win a lot of money? Everyone was saying you hadn't a chance, but I put ten bob on you.'

Hugh said, keeping his eyes away from Jean, 'You need money, of course?'

Evelyn said bitterly, 'Everyone always needs money. Though your royal highness wouldn't notice, of course.'

'We ought to talk about things,' he said.

'I've nothing to say,' Evelyn said.

Hugh scowled. 'It's got to be discussed.'

'When you come back and show me you're sorry.'

Jean twisted her member's card in front of Aubrey. 'Shall we go and look round the paddock, Uncle?' she said.

Aubrey looked bothered. He glanced at Hugh. He said, 'In a

minute, Jean.' He rubbed his hair with the flat of his hand, like a lawyer adjusting his wig — puzzled, gentle, forlorn, but irritated. 'Evelyn's right, Hugh,' he said.

For a moment Hugh looked ill-used. At the look, Aubrey hesitated, then irritation flared into anger.

'Don't think anybody's said anything to me, Hugh, about this. But come out of your dream — before it's too late. For better for worse, for richer for poorer, you married Evelyn. Don't let her down ... that's not our way ... Get back to work. Earn Evelyn's forgiveness. Forget this girl ...'

Hugh stared at his father. The blood drained away from his face, leaving it a turnip lantern of bone through which the eyes peered. He stuttered, stopped, stuttered again, then pulled himself together.

'Father. This is something quite practical. Not a dream. And it is between Evelyn and me.'

Aubrey looked startled — startled and a little deflated. Jean thought it was probably the first time Hugh had ever really stood up to him.

'I should be a poor sort of father if I didn't tell you the truth as I see it — even when it hurts your vanity.' Aubrey's voice was gently domineering.

'But you don't know the truth, Father. You don't know the facts, let alone the truth.'

'You could have come to me, and told me. I'm your father.'

Hugh shook his head. 'It wouldn't have worked. All my life, when I've tried to tell you anything, I've ended by lying. The real thing's never been said.'

Aubrey dug his hands in his pockets, and began to blow a tune through his teeth. Then he said mildly: 'If that's true, I'm very sorry.'

'I am sorry too, Father. It's better said, though ... now.' He was quiet and collected.

Aubrey turned half away.

'We'll leave it there,' he said soberly.

'That would be best, Father.'

Evelyn looked at Aubrey as if he had failed her. Aubrey had probably told her to leave things to him. She dug the ferrule of her umbrella in the mud, and twisted it sharply.

'What's the good, Father?' She stressed the name, as if to deprive Hugh of it. 'He doesn't understand when you're kind. Kindness only makes him take advantage. He'll only lie about her now.'

She began to speak of Hugh's lies, listing them: the lies of the past, the lies Hugh had told to her; to Hilda; to the outside world; speaking in a voice that was triumphant with resentment. People near by stared at the passion in her voice, at the words they caught as they passed, and moved quickly away.

Hugh's mouth assumed a little uneasy smile, to brazen it out as an amusing conversation between friends.

'Look at him now. He thinks it's funny.'

Aubrey looked embarrassed, and moved as if to beckon Evelyn to come away with him.

She shook her head.

'I don't mind if they hear. It would teach him a lesson. He's a thief, too. Ask Jean who stole her bracelet.'

Jean looked involuntarily at the bracelet on her wrist, and caught Hugh's sad eyes. So that was where it had gone that time it disappeared. He must have pawned it. She was not really very interested. She had known about it really, all along. He had been starving at the time.

Evelyn said, 'Once a thief always a thief, and a liar.'

Hugh lifted a hand, but let it fall dead into the other. Evelyn stopped. She looked almost frightened.

He said, 'I'll write. Don't worry about money, that'll be all right.'

Aubrey reappeared from entranced discomfort. He held out his hand to Hugh.

'Come and see us soon, boy.' He patted Hugh's shoulder. 'Come and see us. Soon.'



With the silence, Evelyn's resentment seemed to have gone. She looked very near to tears. She held out her hand to Jean; then to Hugh, and she put up her lips. With a face like stone Hugh bent to kiss her, but at the last moment she turned half away, so that he could only peck her cheek. It was an odd revenge.

On their way back to the drag, he said, making a frontal attack on embarrassment: 'I deserved it, Jean. It's all true, every bit of it.'

She slipped her arm through his. 'Nobody deserves quite that.'

After a while he said, 'I was going to slap her face.'

'I almost wish you had.'

He shook his head. 'She wanted to forgive me.' He hesitated. 'But I wouldn't let her ... I couldn't.'

He said it with the gentleness that always seemed now to signal his increasing self-knowledge.

'I can't afford to be forgiven. I've always been forgiven. I love it. It's been my language — It's so safe to be forgiven. But it's always been running away from me. People have forgiven me what they told me I've done, but never the things that I really did. It's never really been true. It was all outside. So I never found out ... about me ... Now it's all inside, I've just got to bear it — then perhaps I shall be properly forgiven in the end.'

He broke off.

'By God if by no one else ... Or me!' he added, so flippantly that she knew it was not a joke.

It was true, she thought. He had always lived inside out. He had clothed the outside world with his inmost longings and terrors, and acted out publicly, with people for props and scenery, the evasions that most people practise in their souls. So he had always been unscathed. Like a child, he had never understood his own emotions, only other people's.

'Dear Hugh,' she said. 'That doesn't mean anything, except dear Hugh; you're really quite a nice old thing. In spite of everything.'

'In spite of what?'

'In spite of your being such an ass as to marry Evelyn, if you like,' she said.

They strolled towards the drag. Across the course her mother waved.

'Jean,' said Hugh urgently. 'I'm going back with Moonraker.'

'You can't. Daddy will want to celebrate.'

'There's nothing to celebrate.'

'Shut up,' she almost snarled.

When they reached the drag, he went straight to her father and asked him, too formally, for permission to take the horse home.

Her father frowned, and stared at him for a moment. Then he said curtly, 'Of course, Hugh.' He added, 'Dinner will be at eight thirty.'

Hugh seemed to consider. He looked as if he were going to faint. Then he nodded, and disappeared — swiftly, almost rudely.

Her father said later, 'I've got eight hundred and thirty-five pounds to come, on the hundred he gave me. Another seventy-odd, betting in the ring. I suppose you've got about the same.'

She nodded. 'Bess put on a bit for him — a tenner or so.' Jean made it that Hugh had won about eighteen hundred pounds.

Her father said, curiously, 'I hope it's been worth it.'

THE police came one afternoon in early June.

7

It was oppressively hot. There was no wind. The downs were black, ruined earthworks against a sky

like smoke, across which, like a fault in metal, an arc of cirrostratus cloud rose from a point far down-channel, to thin out and disappear high inland.

Jean was in the garden, cutting flowers, when Mrs Timewell came out to tell her that Loveridge, the village sergeant, was asking to see Hugh, with an inspector from Chichester.

'I put them in the workroom, Miss Jean.' She fingered the brooch Hugh had given her to celebrate Moonraker's win, and said

experimentally: 'It's just a fuss about his car, I expect.' She sniffed. 'That car,' she said.

'Yes,' said Jean, 'it'll be about his car, Timey.'

There was a bud, a yellow rose bud, and a green worm crawled out of it. She snipped off the bud, and put down the secateurs.

'I'll be in in a minute, Timey,' she said. She was surprised at the steadiness of her voice. 'You'd better give them some tea, or a bottle of beer.'

'Yes, Miss Jean.'

Then, words congealing slowly, Mrs Timewell said: 'It couldn't be not what you'd call trouble, Miss Jean? I've prayed that it should not be real trouble. Only he's so headstrong.'

Jean shook her head firmly. 'It'll be his car, Timey.'

'That's what I'll tell the girls. They do talk so.'

Jean followed her up to the house. She did the roses carefully. She filled vases, and put the vases in the drawing-room and the dining-room, then turned back to renew the memory of the roses' golden shadows on the polished walnut, before she closed the door.

She went into the workroom.

'Good afternoon, Loveridge. Mister Hugh's up in town. Is there anything I can do?'

'I don't think so, Miss Jegon ... It's Mr Hugh ...' he faltered. 'It's an investigation they've set on foot,' he compromised. He introduced the inspector.

'It's just a routine investigation,' the inspector said.

They always said that.

'I asked the housekeeper to bring you some tea.'

'Thank you, miss. It was very welcome. Will he be long, Mr Maunt, miss?'

'I'm afraid I have no idea.' Then — she did not really know why — she added, 'Sometimes he stays the night in town.'

The inspector said, 'I see. Perhaps it would be better if we came back later.'

She showed them to the door herself.

She went to the lobby to put away the chip basket. The sun glowed through the stained-glass window. She lingered there, staring through the coloured air, holding herself away from thought; trying by act of will to hold all thought, all feeling, at bay; letting her eyes roam from blue to red, to green and yellow, holding up her hand to let the light make coloured, impersonal, abstracted patterns upon it.

She heard Hugh's car come into the yard. It was an antique Austin Seven, and it had cost him ten pounds. He was so proud of it, using it to go every journey. The car stopped. The engine was switched off. Hugh came in by the kitchen. She heard Mrs Timewell say, 'Miss Jean's in ... she's in the sitting-room I think, Master Hugh.'

A long way off her mind said: Timey's afraid to tell him.

Hugh came into the lobby. He saw her standing there, and his face, bloated with blue and red light, contracted, as if he was not expecting her to be there.

'There were two policemen here a few minutes ago. They wanted to see you.'

'Oh.' He picked a piece of dry skin from his lips.

'It's about your car, isn't it, Hugh?'

'I suppose I'd better go down and see them,' he said. But he did not move from where he stood.

'Jean,' he faltered. 'Oh Jean.'

He turned abruptly out of the lobby. She heard the workroom door open; close. A bluebottle buzzed against the window panes. There was an anvil tinkling of the tins outside.

When he did not come, she was afraid. She walked out of the lobby with a heavy warning step, opened the door into the workroom, and went in.

A twelve-bore lay across the table — unloaded, broken open. Hugh stood looking out of the window towards the elms. The blind cord was wrapped tight round one hand, cutting into the flesh, so that even across the room that hand gleamed grey and bloated and dead.

He had stood like that once before, she remembered, but she

could not place the memory. His back was dark against the sunlight. An image flashed into her mind, as vivid as if she really saw it, of his body floating face downwards in a stream — lifeless, bloodless, ebbing away on muddy painted whirls of water, his dead hand upheld by a drift of weeds.

‘Hugh,’ she said sharply. ‘What did they want? You know, don’t you?’

His hand swayed at the end of the blind cord.

‘They came to ask about Fennel,’ he said. ‘They’re looking for Fennel.’

‘Oh.’

She heard a little sigh die away into the warm air. Hugh shifted his feet. He untied the noose, and the blood rushed back into the hand. His eyes watered with the pain, but he let the hand hang at his side.

‘She’s dead.’

He wandered round to the back of the desk, and picked up the old German bayonet her father used as a poker. He held it awkwardly between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, swinging it pendulumwise, back and forth, back and forth, standing perfectly still except for the swinging bayonet, his eyes following its movement: until she wanted to scream.

Then he caught the blade up with his other hand, and held it tight.

‘She’s dead.’

‘Did you kill her?’

There was a silence — or rather, an infinity of small far-off shades of sound, that made up a kind of silence.

He met her eyes.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Even if I didn’t pull the trigger.’

He turned the bayonet in a little fierce movement, so that it pointed towards him; let it fall.

‘She thought I was going to kill myself.’

He gazed at the last sunlight on the elms, the long black shadows slanting across the lawn, and the iridescent decaying sky.

'Hugh. I must ask this ... You were both going to kill yourselves? ...'

The rooks were cawing as they circled the elms before they came in to the roost.

'I fucked it. For the most complicated reasons. For the ... anyway, that was what it was. I was afraid.'

He picked up the twelve-bore, closed the breech, put it back in its place in the rack, and closed the glass door.

'But Hugh, why? ... If you were together?'

He stared out of the window, lost in his own dark world.

'She knew I wouldn't go through with it ... and she didn't mind ... She knew I was like that and she loved me, and didn't mind ... because it was me ... She wanted me to stay alive ... It was two days before I came to you, Jean. You see, I didn't know what to do ... I'd found out what love really is ... and it was too late.'

Outside, dusk was falling, sunlight withdrawn, air still, darkness of trees and hedges advancing towards the darkening room.

He sighed. 'I'll go down to Loveridge's cottage. I'd better take a bag.'

'Hugh. That's between you and Fennel. But you're not guilty of anything. You've got money ... you could catch the night boat, and Daddy could straighten things ...'

'No. I'll take what's coming. That's the only way, now.' He put his arm round her shoulders to comfort her.

He walked away two steps; two miles; stood at the door.

'I'd better get on with it,' he said.

She said, stupidly: 'You'll be back?'

He looked at her queerly. Standing there forlorn, he seemed terribly far away.

He said, 'She wrote me a letter. She wanted me to live. To learn to live.'

At the door he lifted his hand beside his face, wiggled his finger to say goodbye, and went.





At the time, she was utterly convinced. But later, when her father came back from Lewes Gaol, with Fairfax, the K.C., his friend who was taking the case, and she had to answer questions, it was surprisingly difficult to make it all coherent.

It all depended on whether Hugh had really changed.



## BOOK TWO

1929-32



1 HE had always taken it for granted that when he grew up he would become a vet. It was not a vocation, really, so much as a formula to solve all the stress equations: a practical, even rather a humble, compromise, between reality and dream, that he had come to when he was twelve years old and had never questioned since. Not to be a vet would be a kind of treachery.

He had always known his father could not afford to pay for his training. He had worked very hard for a scholarship — but he had failed to win it. He had won a gold medal, and a bursary for twenty-five pounds — but that was no good at all. Then Uncle Matt had written, and it had seemed that everything was plain sailing.

When his father came in that night he was tired, his brown face drawn in tight creases against the cheekbones, his blue eyes drowning in muddy pools of shadow; he was irritable and lonely in the exhaustion that was somehow a sinew of his character, his integrity. Hugh followed him into the studio.

There was always a kind of deliberate inexperience in his approaches to his father, a kind of undefended eagerness that seemed naive even to himself — as though only by oversimplifying thought and emotion almost to the point of childishness, could he ever feel capable of matching his father's integrity. Perhaps, too, in some desperate way, secret even from himself, he had to refuse to draw some obvious conclusion from evidence that was before his eyes.

It was a bad moment. His father was tired, but Hugh had to blurt out everything at once, so there should be no feeling of slyness or tactics. But Uncle Matt had written to his father too. His father knew already.

'It's awfully generous of him, Father. I think ...'

Aubrey stared past his son's eyes, thrust his hands down into his

trousers pockets, turned slowly away to stare out of the window: staring in stubborn tangential silence at the late sun on the hollyhocks, at the haze over Greenwich; exuding silence, hiding thought and feeling under layers of impermeable reticence that always seemed a reproach.

'It's for you to decide, of course,' he said absently. 'It's for you to decide.' With a little bewildered irritable gesture, he knuckled his stiff hair. 'But you're eighteen now. Do you really want to go through life indebted to your Uncle Matt?'

'No, Father. But it will only be a loan. I'm to repay it when I qualify.'

His father had a puzzled, almost a defeated, look in his eyes, as if at a loss to know how to explain gently, something so taken for granted, so little questioned, that he had felt it sacred.

'That's not quite our way, is it, old chap? We're only plain middle-class people. Pay our way. That's you and I. Surely?'

'Uncle wanted to give me the money. I insisted it should be a loan. Just because of that, Father.'

'Yes.' The word, hardly more than a syllable of silence, was absorbed in the mournful tuneless tune that his father began to breathe. A frontier had been crossed.

'I've never spoken about this, old chap. Perhaps I should have. One's afraid of hurting your feelings.' His father turned back to the long window. A long streamer of smoke from a train trailed sugar-pink against a smoky lemon-tinted sky. 'Frankly, I don't think you're cut out to be a vet. I don't think you've got the savvy.'

His father stared at the wedge of vapour, and watched it thickening, drifting in echelon away.

'Perhaps I'm wrong. But I think it's only a schoolboy dream. What they call a "wish-fulfilment fantasy" nowadays. It's living so long with your Uncle Matthew after your mother ...' He broke off, then resumed: 'He's wealthy and grand — a country gentleman. I think if you look at it honestly you'll find that your idea of becoming a veterinary surgeon is only a dream of living the life of a country gentleman — and being paid for it.'



Hugh was shaking his head, in a stammering physical urgency to deny. 'No ... no, Father ... that's not true.' But suddenly, shamefully, quite impossibly, it seemed that it was.

'I'm not blaming you,' his father went on. 'Everyone has his dream. But it's not practical politics. A vet's sent round to the tradesman's entrance ...'

His father said something about facing the fact that he was not a man of his hands. 'After all, it's not a crime. You've got the gift o' the gab. You've got a pleasant personality, cheerful, easy-going. People take to you quickly. Like my elder brother Kingston. He's cut out to sell things. He makes a very good living.'

There were the elect, who made things; and the lesser breeds — the functionless — sharp, glib folk who made profits out of the things others made.

That was what his father thought of him.

He heard his father telling him that he had had a chat with his younger brother Alexander, who was a director of Best & Maunt (the firm Hugh's grandfather had helped to found — Best & Maunt, Makers of High Class Varnishes and Enamels)... But he was not attending.

'I didn't prompt him in any way, old chap. He had come to the same opinion. Independently ...'

He knew what must come next. He was bitterly disappointed. Somehow it was as though his father had set a trap; and he wished, wished, wished, he had not had to do that. He stammered: 'But Father —'

'My advice is to take the job Alex offers, Hugh. You'd have to do a year or so in the factory, of course. To learn the ropes. But it wouldn't be long before you went on the road as a traveller.'

'I'm sure I'd never make a salesman, Father. And it's so useless. I've always wanted to do something worthwhile. Something useful. I've never wanted to make just money. I — I want to be of service ...' But it only sounded childish.

Aubrey picked up brushes, and tested them against his finger.

'I don't think I understand that sort of talk, Hugh. All work is

useful. Most men work for their living from nine to six. From six to nine they live their own lives according to their means. Look, old chap, I don't want to persuade you against your will. Why don't you sleep on it?

He had not meant to say it; since his idea of being a vet was so phoney, there was no point in going on. But somehow he was making a last throw, a kind of desperate challenge ...

'Very well, Father. When do I start making paint?' A leaf blew across the glass roof of the studio. His father was studying him as if he suspected a trick; but of course it was like Hugh to give up so easily, it was in character. 'After all, I shall be making the paints you use, shan't I, Father?' Bloody little Peter Pan.

'Artists' colours are quite a different trade.' Aubrey went on, abstracted and gentle: 'I'm sure you won't regret it. To pay your own way's the thing. And if I'm wrong, and you find you still want to be a vet after a year or two, you can save for it.' He stared at his son with judicial benevolence; he had seen through him, and was warning him against his special and besetting weakness. 'But — stand on your own feet.'

'Yes, Father,' Hugh said. 'I expect that's what I'll do.'

That night he dug out an old tin savings bank from a drawer in his desk. He wrote 'H.V.F.' on a label, and stuck it on the tin.

H.V.F.

Hugh's Veterinary Fund.

He put in three shillings and ninepence. Every penny he possessed.

One must start as one meant to go on.

He began in the colour department. Uncle Alexander said he must go through the mill. He would earn twenty-eight shillings and fourpence a week. He need expect no favours because he was a member of the family.

It seemed a challenge; and when Whiting, the departmental manager, put him on the mills, as a labourer, he was glad. It was a chance to prove himself. Whiting said grimly, 'They're a rough lot,'

and he was ready if necessary to fight for his place among them. It would be a test.

But it was not like that at all. It was almost as if the men were in a conspiracy to make things easy for him, to shield him just because his name was Maunt. And in all sorts of ways, they were kind.

Until he mastered the trick of up-ending and rolling the heavy casks — the little heavy ones of red and orange lead, the bigger lighter ones of barytes and lithopone — someone was always watching, to give him a hand. 'You could rupture yerself doing it all wrong like that, mate. 'Ere, let me.' When he caught the knack they were as pleased as if he had achieved manhood in front of their eyes.

They were anxious that he should learn what little they could teach. They would call him over to mill or vat and show him the thing as it happened, so that he could pick up what they could not explain. They were apologetic that they could only teach him rules of thumb.

They would discuss his future exhaustively. To learn, he ought to be in the office with Whiting, making out the mixings. 'That's the way to learn this lark.'

'Tchah, 'e ought to be in the labs.'

'Theory,' Parminter spat.

Brindells said it was favourite to see old Whiting. 'Tell him it ain't doing you no good, mate. Not being out here with us.'

'Stands to reason — old Whiting, he aint going to have him in there; not in the office. Not with him,' Parminter said.

'Why on earth not?' said Hugh.

'On account he's afraid when he learns you what he knows he'll be out of a job.'

'They wouldn't do that.'

'That's your story. But you got to see it his way, mate. They've got to find a job for you, ain't they? You being who you are. Old Whiting won't take no chances. He's just got married and he's buying a house, mate.'

Brindells said, 'What's favourite is for you to see your old

mate — your uncle. Tell him. He's a director. He'll see you're all right.'

He always said, 'But it's so good for my character.' And they thought it was a joke, an upper-class joke.

But in a resentful, unadmitted sort of way, he knew that was exactly what Uncle Alex had had in mind. He had to learn not to be too big for his boots; to stand on his own feet. And it was very very boring.

To break the monotony he would offer to run their errands for them. 'Want a mike, Hughie boy?' they would ask. 'Want to get out for a spit and a drag?' — and they would send him over to the stores to get this or that.

That was how he met Jim Boylan. Going to the gum stores for a sample of dragon's blood.

Jim was in charge of the gum stores, where the stocks of resins for varnish-making were kept: copal and kauri, colophony, benzoin, sandarac, shellac, accroides, dragon's blood, gum Arabic. He was Irish, and an old regular cavalryman too, and he had blarneyed and connived until he had achieved possession of the little groom's cottage overlooking the mews, and supervision of the few remaining horses in the transport department as well.

That first day, Jim was talking to one of the vanmen about a suspected case of cracked heel in one of the Clydesdales. Hugh offered to bring over some glycerine and alum from the colour department.

'Put it right in no time,' he said.

Jim said, with appropriately mitigated scorn, 'Is that what they do in the yeomanry, sir?'

He could have hugged him. He explained about Uncle Matt.

Jim, small-headed predatory sergeant-majorish, mimed his intense delight.

'Matthew Jegon ye said?'

It appeared Jim had been in Uncle Matt's troop when Matthew Jegon first joined the regiment.

'And that's all of thirty years ago, sir. "Mouse" he was then, him

being shy an' making no more noise than a fish in a brook. Ask him if he remembers Jim Boylan, and see what he says.' He paused. 'You've got more'n a look of him. Saving your presence,' he added. 'But what are ye's doing in this gallery?'

Jim remembered old Charles, now head groom at Troy, and once squadron trumpeter. There was a story about that, which Jim told. And a story about Hayhoe, too: Hayhoe, who had been Uncle's manservant until the day he died. It was quite two hours later, when Hugh crept back into the millroom, but he need not have worried: no one had even noticed he was not there.

He fell into a habit of slipping over to see Jim almost every day. Nobody cared enough to stop him.

He felt guilty about it. It was, almost consciously, a retreat into the past, into the idiom of childhood. There was always tea going in the gum stores, strong tea stewing on the stove, and talk, and Jim's magnificently regimental and improbable stories; and the vanmen's too. It was the physical re-creation of a memory, the memory of long afternoons at Troy as a small boy, listening to the grooms round the tackroom fire, drinking in their talk, the knowing, factual, professional talk of men who saw the respectable world from beneath and were not taken in by it. It was the re-creation of a privileged relationship, of a golden age. But it was a language and a relationship he understood. There at least, he was accepted without needing to explain.

Then one morning he arrived at the gum store and there seemed to be a crisis. Jim was saying, in an oddly heartbroken way, 'I've never let them down before,' and the vanmen were giving him advice.

There was a curricule drawn by two rather flashy bays. It was the embodiment of the firm's trademark, and the pride of old Best's eye. The only man Jim would trust to drive it was ill. He could not go himself — there was a load of copal to be unloaded — and old Best had rung up for the curricule. There was some paint to be delivered to one of the embassies in Belgrave Square. 'It's waiting at the showrooms now, and the old man had set his heart on



having it delivered the old way, and I promised him ... I've never let him down before,' Jim said again.

'I'll do it, Jim.'

He had to offer. To offer was to show that he accepted the responsibilities of the privileged position he had assumed. That made it real; true; not a dream. To be prepared to pay for it. He supposed he would get the sack if they ever found out.

Jim looked at him. 'I believe you would, too.'

They fitted him out with top hat and livery coat. 'They'll never notice your understandings under the rug,' Jim said.

The top hat was too big. They folded paper to make it fit. The lining was black with grease, but he put it on at a tilt, with an air. They harnessed up the bays. Two men were put ready to open the gates. Jim stood at the wheeler's head while Hugh clambered up on to the box.

'Way for His Majesty's mails!' Jim's hand came down on the wheeler's rump in a noisy slap, and there could be no escape. The gates were flung open. Whipping the bays into a hard gallop — their hooves stuttered and slid and sparked on the slippery cobbles of the yard, and he had to take the corner into the road on two wheels — he was half-way up the street before he had the horses properly collected. Then he settled down to the hour's drive up to the West End. It was rather fun — Corinthian — romantic — and he was safe enough, now he was away from the factory.

But when he reached the showrooms the guv'nor's Rolls was parked outside. Traffic was jammed solid; there could be no escape. Then the lorry ahead started forward, and suddenly he realized he did not care.

As he pulled in to the kerb the guv'nor came out to get into his car. Hugh touched his hat politely with the whip stock. The old man stared at him without the slightest sign of recognition, raised his hat, got into the car. The old man had not recognized him. He could get away with murder if he wanted to.

When he got back to the factory he drove through the open gate, pulled the horses up on their hocks, and with the airs of a



Regency buck, threw the reins to Jim and clambered down from the box.

Jim held his thumbs up questioningly.

Hugh nodded.

'You young blaggard,' Jim said.

He told the whole story, and Jim was delighted. 'The Cavalry spirit,' he said oratorically. 'Dash and effrontery, l'arme blanche, will carry you through the gates of hell.'

By nightfall the story was all round the factory.

'Didn't think you 'ad it in yer, mate,' Brindells said. 'Straight I didn't — kiddin' to the old man like that.'

He took off his green cap in imitation. 'Must have been good as a play. You've got your nerve, mate.'

Of course. But he hoped Uncle Alexander would never hear about it. Nor his father.

On the Saturday following, his father's elder brother Kingston rang up and asked him down to their summer cottage at Bray for the week-end.

He did not want to go. Uncle Kingston's wife, Aunt Dot, was always so exuberant. She always maintained her husband's family were worthy but dull. They needed livening up, she said, and she always tried to make Hugh her accomplice in her efforts to bring them 'a little Life'. That always made him feel disloyal. She would rake up all that silly business of him wanting to be a vet. She would make it sound as if his father had stopped him doing what he wanted; as if his father did not understand him.

But his father said, 'Why don't you go, old chap?'

He went up to pack. His only pair of white flannels needed cleaning. Thinking of his cousins' immaculate turn-out for the river, and tennis, he decided not to take them. He would make an excuse. He limped across the room to get some riding breeches. The ones Uncle Matt had given him, made by his own tailor in Stratton Street. It was like having an ace up his sleeve.

Raymond and Arthur, his cousins, met him at the station. They

were dressed in white flannels, and blazers with badges, and striped scarves, and they had a shiny open sports car, all complete.

He had to smile to himself. They were very suburban. He doubted if either of them could have survived a day at the factory.

Raymond waved at the car. 'Nice, isn't she? Dad gave her to me for my twenty-first. She'll do eighty.'

On the way, Raymond told Hugh about their other guests. There was Diana, Raymond's current girl friend, and her cousin Margery, of an age with Arthur. Hugh knew them slightly, and his heart sank. Diana and Margery could make an intimacy with one person, only by excluding someone else; they needed an enemy. Hugh had been their scapegoat before. The campaign seemed obvious, when Arthur spoke.

'Don't forget the girl Fennel,' Arthur shouted against the wind from the open back seat.

Raymond scowled. 'We don't want her butting in. She's here because Diana was sorry for her — all alone in London, or something.'

He brought the car to a stop by the house, and stepped out over the door.

He put a hand on Hugh's arm. Man of the world he said:

'Shouldn't have too much to do with the girl Fennel, old boy. She's a menace. Di says she's got the hell of a reputation.'

In the afternoon Aunt Dot took him into the sitting-room. She wanted to have a nice long chat. When they went into the room Fennel was standing there; alone in the bright room, standing beside a pot of begonias red as wounds.

Most people alone in a strange room seem to feel guilty. When someone comes in, they shift their ground, move forward, speak, as if they need to explain away their being alone. But Fennel did not move. She stood, as she had been standing, quite still, absorbed in stillness.

Aunt Dot said, embarrassingly: 'What a shame, Fennel. All alone? You mustn't let them leave you behind like that. You mustn't let them be unkind.'

She introduced them.

'This is my Hugh. He's my favourite nephew, aren't you, Hugh? And his dotty old Auntie Dot's his favourite auntie, isn't she, Hugh?'

Fennel moved through the dusty sunlight towards them, with long steps that were swift and impulsive, yet collected as a ballet dancer's. Her hand was cool and narrow in his. Afterwards as she smoothed her dress he noticed her long, transparent, fluid fingers, and he had a sudden vivid sense of control — of her body being totally at the service of her consciousness, as if movement was communication.

Aunt Dot left them.

'You young people won't want old me,' she said. 'But be good.'

The door clicked. Fennel glanced at the click, then at him, to tell him that he need not bother to stay. A little later she made an excuse and left him. But at the door, her small vivid heart-shaped face smiled speculatively at him, as though she would have liked to be friendly but understood that he was committed to the other side.

She was like a drawing in quicksilver. One knew where one was with her at the only moment it mattered — now.

That evening, while he unpacked, Aunt Dot came and talked. She wanted to get him by himself, she said. She stroked the buckskin of his breeches.

'Ray said you'd be sure to bring riding togs. And I've got some horses coming round from Tatum's in the morning specially for you. 'Cos you love it so; and you won't get any chance of riding at that old factory. Aren't I a nice old Auntie Dot?'

Hugh thanked her with a kiss, feeling a kind of despair because he could never feel gratitude on the scale she seemed to demand. She wanted to have a nice long chat, she said. She wanted to talk about how he liked the factory; how 'disappointed' he must have been not to be allowed to become a vet; how dreadful for him, with his 'gentlemanly ways', to be in the factory at all. He managed to head her off somehow, every time; but he felt he had been very rude.

Surprisingly, as she went out she paused at the door. 'You'll

never hear a word against your father, will you? I like loyal people like that. That's why I'm so fond of you.'

Next morning early, Aunt Dot was down to see the horses brought round. She had to explain, of course.

'This is my nephew,' she said to the stable lad. 'I want you to see he has a good horse. He's won races. He's almost a professional, you know. You'll see he has a nice horse, won't you?' When she saw Hugh's look of embarrassment she made matters worse by adding, 'I'm loyal, Hugh. I'm proud of your steeplechasing; even if stuffy old Hilda thinks it's wicked.'

She insisted upon his taking a showy chestnut that had a mouth of iron. He had fancied a little flea-bitten grey mare, dish-faced and sensitive, that looked as if it might be half Arab.

The ride was dull. Raymond and Arthur could not just ride; they had to play a fidgeting game of touch-last up and down the lanes, and Tatum's 'skins' — as, horsily, they called them — were sluggish and indifferent. Hugh settled down a little behind the others, to try and awaken the chestnut to some memory of his early training before his mouth and manners had been spoiled by people who did not know any better.

He felt detached, cut off from them by superior skill. They shouted and laughed and clattered. He was silent and smiling, but they could not catch him. He kept away from them, guarding his detachment — as if it gave him prestige.

Inevitably they made a set at Fennel, on the grey halfbred. Each time they came racing up to tag her, the grey passaged and shied, and, in a curiously understated and elusive way she was quite terrified. Hugh watched, lazily contemptuous.

They turned up a cart lane, beside a copse of beeches, and ahead he saw Raymond ride towards Fennel to make her 'he' again; and on an impulse of resentment — he was not thinking of the girl at all; obscurely he was getting his own back on success — Hugh settled down in the saddle to ride Ray off, as if they were playing polo.

On the impact, Raymond lost his irons. He snatched at the reins, surprised and scared.

'Careful, you fool!' he shouted.

Ray recovered his stirrup irons and reined up, turning white-faced towards Hugh. A rabbit rocketed across the cart ruts. A small breeze sifted through the high leaves of the beeches.

'You might have had me off,' Ray said aggrievedly.

Suddenly, because he was ashamed of something emotional underlying his action, because he sensed that Raymond was afraid of him, Hugh was angry.

'That was the idea,' he said briefly.

Diana said, a little too loud, a little too socially, 'Oh, what's in that lovely wood? Can't we get into it?' and the incident collapsed, settling down in little sidelong murmurs and regroupings as they rode up to the gate.

Fennel and Hugh were left alone.

He saw she was almost in tears. He felt very chivalrous. Chivalrous and protective.

'Raymond's an ass,' he said.

He asked if she would like to change horses, the chestnut was quiet and so lazy. She seemed to think it a good idea. By the time they had made the change the others were out of sight.

The grey was a good little horse, responsive and lively. He put it at a bramble bush and it popped over like a bird, and, just to show off, he bent it in a tight sequence of figure-eights, between the elms.

Watching, she said: 'You must think I'm stupid.'

'No.'

He wanted her to know that he truly understood.

Suddenly he was saying passionately, 'It's not stupid. It can be hell. Other people never think how awful being afraid can be.'

He told her then about how he had been a water-funk at school. About standing on the edge of the bath, afraid of the cold silvery snakelike shadows of water on white tiles, dreading the moment when Hicks or Stobie would notice and start chanting 'water funk,' the final moment when they would push him in. About being sick



with shame, and yet dreading still more the invisible hands in the water that would pull him down.

It was as if he was still so ashamed of it that he had to get the telling over quickly. At the end he tried to turn it into a joke; but it did not come off.

'It's poisoned my life. I can't even drink water now. If I'm on a bridge or a pier and I look down through the boards I can still see the water shadows and the snakes of light, and I know it's not really safe to stand there, and it's all I can do to stop myself running till I'm on land again.'

She lifted her head, and said, seriously, 'But it's not the same. The sea can't bite.'

'All dragons bite.'

'Your dragon hasn't got four hooves to kick you with, and it's not six feet high to fall off of.'

'My dragon is an imperial dragon. It has seven claws on each of its hands, and sometimes it's fifty feet high. It can be very deep too,' he added tartly. 'Hence the expression "out of your depth".'

Then she caught his eye and they were both laughing, abandoned to laughter like children.

Rather disconcertingly she stopped, and looked at him attentively for almost a minute.

'I haven't laughed like that for ...' She looked away. 'It's lovely to laugh ... People don't,' she said.

'No.' It was true. 'They don't. I wonder why?'

She said, with a kind of mock severity, 'Why are you so different? I expected ...' and she was studying his face as if to seek in the stillness or the movement of the tiny muscles of the skin the clue to the thing that baffled her. 'You even look different,' she said.

Perhaps he had been talking nonsense. It did not matter, she had understood. They were intimates, and that had nothing to do with like or dislike, it was just that their machinery was the same. They were the same kind of foreigner; they were a language short, and so all talk between them could always be small talk.



'You're gentle,' she said.

They had come to the gate into the road. Then he saw the waxwings, a crowd of them fluttering like bright, red-flecked bees over the brambles at the side of the road.

'Look — waxwings,' he said. 'I've never seen them before.'

The sun came out. The red-barred wing-tips glowed like fireflies against the dull cobwebby air.

'They don't come to England often,' he said.

'They're lovely. Lovely. What did you call them?'

'Waxwings. See the bars of red and white, like sealing-wax?'

'Sealing-waxwings.'

'Sealing's silent, as in the confessional.'

'Silent sealing waxwings.'

A horse whinnied. The cloud of birds lifted, swirling away behind trees, then perching on the telegraph wires.

'They're like little pattering grace notes. Like a cadenza.'

Notes on a stave. He whistled a tune that followed vaguely the curve of the birds on the wires.

'Your sight reading's very bad,' she said. 'That little chap, the third from the end — he ought to be a flat.'

'He is a bar's rest,' he said.

'Flat.'

'Bar's rest.'

'Flat. I'll play it to you some day.'

They hacked along the grass verge, and she was chattering about the Academy. She was taking violin for her first instrument; for the second, the bassoon.

'You need never be out of work if you play the bassoon,' she said. 'Orchestras always need bassoons.' She told him about the movement of the Brahms concerto she was to play with the First Orchestra at the next term's concert. She told him how Daddy — he was a soldier — had died when she was nine; how after that there was just never quite enough money.

'Of course Mummy had not the vaguest idea of the value of money. On her income no one who had the foggiest idea of the

value of money would even have tried. For nearly six years — Ricky at Repton, and me with the best teachers she could find.'

They had lived abroad — Vevey, Milan, Brussels; living in horrid little pensions near her teachers. 'We were always being thrown out because they wouldn't stand my practising.' When the debts got too pressing her mother would sell something — some of her capital; a ring; a fur coat. She gave English lessons, too. 'You can't sink lower than that, short of going on the streets,' Fennel said. 'But in our funny way we were happy. Even Ricky ... Mummy was always happy.'

Ricky had gone into the R.A.F. with a short-service commission, and things had been easier then. But he was killed flying ... 'And Mummy never got over it. Ricky was always her sardine, really.' Fennel was fifteen when her mother died, and she and the tiny remains of the estate were left in the charge of a sort of guardian in Venice. There she had studied until she got a scholarship to the Academy.

It all came out as the thoughts came, a communication on an immediate, innocent level. But it was a game, too: a subtle, even rather an aristocratic, private game. And he knew why; it was just the sort of game he always played himself. If the hearer understood the charade he would understand the reality, the loneliness and the despair, held on such a fragile leash. But if he failed, he would never know his failure, to be embarrassed by it.

When she stopped, he heard himself saying, very slowly, very flatly, letting the words come out without interference from him:

'After that there can't be anything else. You've just got to play the fiddle.'

She was watching him almost anxiously, as if it was terribly important to know if he had got something right.

He said, 'So much time ... so much struggle ... so much ...'

'Love,' she said. 'So much love.'

'Yes.'

There was another long silence, and then he said, 'If only I'd got something like that.'

As he said it, over her shoulder he saw the others coming out of a ride on to the road.

He couldn't help it. 'Of course,' he added in a quite different voice, 'in a way, really, I have.'

Before she even saw the others she knew what had happened.

He bent and studied her feet in the stirrups, articulating the movement for the others to understand at long range.

'It might be better if we took up a hole in those leathers,' he said. He dismounted and fussed carefully with the buckles.

'Thank you. Yes. That's much better.' She spoke like a stranger.

She rode straight up to Diana and began to chatter about the waxwings. 'So lovely. Breathtaking. Like red sparks.'

You could not trust anybody at all.

Ray said, 'See you've swapped horses.' One made a little sour face and threw up one's eyes.

It didn't matter. They would never meet again.

## 2

A WEEK later he was transferred to the varnish department.

There was a month in the varnish house working as a helper on the fires; to learn the rudiments. He got so interested in that, that it seemed like demotion when Mr Bernard took him into the office with him to do the testing for the department. Mr Bernard said that was the way to learn — though until six weeks before, the work had been done by a sixteen-year-old girl.

Still, he was caught up by the work — fascinated. It was exciting, like trying to break a code or decipher an unknown script, because varnish-making was still a mystery in the medieval sense. The varnish-makers were guided by tradition and experience, a closely guarded secret lore that might be transmitted but could never really be put into words.

There were rules of thumb. Certain gums made for hardness,

others for wear, or brilliance, or quick drying. Different oils changed, or underlined, those qualities. There were formulae written out in a big book like a family Bible, which Mr Bernard kept locked in a safe, and which only a few were ever allowed to see.

Bernard and the varnish-runners would break the gums and study the fracture, and test the viscosity of the oils between forefinger and thumb; in silent agreement they would alter the mixing, use a different gum, a different oil, or different proportions of each, and the finished product rarely varied from the standard sample.

'It's all in knowing how, that's the secret.' They were always talking about the 'secret'. The secret of hard drying — the secret of paleness — the secret of weathering — secrets that were secret only because they could not be put into words. It was like music. An animal world — to be explored with the senses, and understood with the mind: both at once.

There was all the daily product of the department to be tested. A great deal of it was stored for maturing. Aged, bright, and clear as gin, the matured varnishes had to be checked again before they were canned and labelled for sale.

There were complaints to be investigated, which the travellers usually brought in themselves. They liked to talk things over with old Bernie in person. They would bring in inquiries too — specifications or samples of varnishes designed to meet certain special requirements, usually industrial. Sometimes, if he was busy, Bernie would give Hugh a rough directive and leave him to try making a sample to match. Once or twice he succeeded, and he felt he was really getting on.

He was on the side of virtue, apparently: the industrious apprentice. Yet in a queer, unadmitted, unaware sort of way, like a premonition, it was as if it was really only a craze. It could not last. Once the discovery had been made he would be bored. He felt like a traitor, when Uncle Alex smiled at him and told him how well Mr Bernard had said he was doing.

Then the inquiry from Ballances came in.

Stevens brought in a sample; an industrial Japan, a black varnish

to be stoved on to metal. It was all very hush-hush, Stevens said. Ballances were dissatisfied with their present suppliers, and they might conceivably be willing to change. He had wangled a sample, a specification, and a schedule of tests; but that must never be allowed to leak out.

‘No names, no packdrill, eh Bernie?’ said Stevens. ‘But if the stuff’s right, and the price is right, they’re in the market for forty thousand gallons a year.’

Stevens was a florid man — fat, with a kind of sulky, menacing fatness, a fatness as if carved out of wood, that made even his jokes seem hectoring. Hugh loathed him wholeheartedly.

Mr Bernard made twenty trial mixings before he was satisfied that his Japan matched the sample. When Hugh did the final tests, it seemed to him the two samples were identical.

They sent off a gallon.

Six days later the half-empty can came back, with a note. The Japan supplied by Best & Maunt had been tested by the foreman. He found it dried with a bloom — a soft velvety sheen like the bloom of a ripe grape. If Best & Maunt cared to retest they would find that this was the case.

It was.

Hugh said, ‘That means there’s moisture in it, doesn’t it, Mr Bernard?’ He knew, but he had to ask in case Bernard thought he had done the tests sloppily and missed it.

Yet the sample they had kept for reference dried perfectly.

They made another small mixing, using the same recipe. Bernard tested it himself. It was perfect. They divided the batch into two equal halves, and sent off one half by way of a sample. Within the week that came back too. The same trouble. And once again the filed sample was perfect.

Stevens came, and Bernard showed him the evidence. For some reason, Stevens glowered at Hugh. It seemed tactful to leave Stevens alone with Bernard.

Hugh went over to the gum stores. It was really rather ironic; old Bernie liked him to go down to the gum stores whenever he had a



quarter of an hour free. 'Get to know the gums, boy. Break 'em, smell 'em, feel 'em, so that you can tell 'em blindfolded. You'll get to know more about varnish that way than I can ever tell you.' So one stood about in the gum stores with a lump of kauri in one's hands and wasted time virtuously.

Jim asked what was the matter with Stevens. 'He came across the yard a moment since, looking like a wet week of Sundays.'

Hugh told Jim about the samples 'blooming'. Parminter was there, and one or two others. Parminter reckoned it was the foreman at Ballances.

'E's got his mouth wide open, mate, waiting for the drop. Fifty nicker'd see him sweet.'

Jim asked oracularly whose hand would dare perform the work of corruption. 'These ten years it's been "instant dismissal, and proceedings in the High Court, for any servant of the Company who gives or connives at giving any bribe or secret commission to obtain an advantage". An' you can say what you like about old Best, but he's a most amazin' man of his word.'

A man from the Enamel said, 'I should smile. It goes on all the time, mate. When I was in the Canning, 'fore I went up the Enamel, oncet we had to put fifty pounds in a quart tin and seal it up. Fifty nicker in notes in a quart can. Labelled Eau dee Nil — for the special attention of the clerk of the works.'

One of the vanmen said, 'That. That's just a tale. I'll lay you never saw it, not with your own eyes.'

'What's the diff, anyway? A turkey or a case of Scotch at Christmas, compliments of the firm — or a few nice crackling notes and no one the wiser? It stands to reason. There's no taste in nothing, mate.'

He had heard it all before. It was a fixed article of their belief that every large order was the result of bribery. 'Sweetening'; 'the old dropsy'. They knew how easy it was to sabotage a paint, how untraceable; a teaspoonful of water, a pinch of dust, a drop of motor oil, and the stuff was unusable. They knew there was really not much difference in quality between the brands of different manufacturers. Here and there there were a few outstanding ones; every



man in the business knew about them, they were household words. The rest depended on advertising and salesmanship, to stress, differences that were not really there. What if the foreman, the charge hand, or the manager did himself a bit of good too? Good luck to him.

When Hugh got back to the office, Uncle Alexander had joined Bernard and Stevens. The room was full of furry, greasy smoke, and the stove in the corner where they tested the Japans was almost red hot. Bernie and Uncle Alex were peering at the sheets of aluminium, picking at the skins of Japan with their thumb-nails.

Stevens said — it sounded so silly and insincere — ‘That’s a lovely Japan, Bernie.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with the Japan.’

Uncle Alex let a piece of aluminium fall. ‘I dunno Bernie ... Atmospheric conditions, it might be ... sudden chilling after stoving, eh Bernie? Humidity in the drying room. Some local condition ... fog?’

Bernie said, ‘It’s the same for both, theirs and ours.’

Stevens picked up the gallon can that had come back from Ballances and sniffed it. ‘Must be the moth got at it,’ he said.

Uncle Alex said: ‘You *must* see that foreman, Stevens.’

A week later they got a trial order from Ballances for five hundred gallons.

It was Tuesday, and on Tuesdays Hugh left early to go to the Poly. When he had started in the Varnish, and was interested, he had begun a course at the Poly in paint technology. As he was going through the gate after clocking out, Uncle Alexander called him, offering him a lift. It was raining.

They reached the Whitechapel Road. The lilac-coloured naphtha flares on the traders’ stalls spurted their liquid light up into the murk. The reflection, in the thin silt of moisture and dust that covered the roadway, made the cobblestones gleam each one separate, like fishes’ scales.

‘The road’s like butter,’ Uncle Alex said.

How slow he was. The hooter was always pressed a fraction of a second after the jay-walker was out of danger, the brake was never taken off until the skid had really started. Detachedly one remembered that the makers of the car used Best & Maunt's varnish on their coachwork. Hence the car, of course. It was too powerful a car for Uncle Alex to drive.

As he drove, Alexander was talking about Ballances. How well Stevens had done. He could sell celluloid in the other place, he said.

The car slowed for a crossing, though nobody was on it.

'Can't be too careful,' Uncle Alex said. 'The road's like butter.'

Uncle Alex went on talking about Ballances. 'Just Japan alone, they use forty thousand gallons a year. I suppose that one order would be worth in the order of eleven thousand pounds ... a real prize.'

Hugh was lying back in the seat, only half listening. He was sure Uncle was telling him about large orders to whet his appetite to be a salesman. That was what it was. Pep-talk. A bribe.

'How much commission would Stevens get out of a deal like that, Uncle?'

Uncle Alex's eyes turned from the road and smiled at him. It was an unexpected, sweet smile; like his father's. The wrinkles round the eyes and on the well shaved cheeks looked like the creases in worn velvet. Uncle Alex seemed pleased because Hugh had said the right thing.

'Between eight hundred and a thousand pounds, I should think. Of that order.'

When they got to Piccadilly Circus, Alexander said, 'Hop out here, old chap. You can take the Tube now, can't you?'

But he walked: walked up Regent Street through the cold rain, feeling stoic and eccentric to be walking up the deserted street in the rain without overcoat or hat, while everyone else went by bus or taxi or stood sheltering in a doorway. His shoe was leaking.

There might be a concert. He walked up towards the Queen's Hall.

There was no concert. But he hung around the foyer waiting, not knowing why. To explain his waiting to the clerk in the advance-booking office, he took some concert handbills from the racks.

He was standing staring at the posters when he saw her walking in the rain, violin case in her hand. He ducked back into the foyer; but she had seen him.

They talked swiftly, fell silent, studied each other. The rain pouring noisily from the glass marquee slid across the pavement, twisting into brown, glassy ropes in the gutter.

'I didn't know there was a concert.'

'There isn't. That is, I was just browsing round.'

A church clock struck eight.

Hugh felt the milled edges of the silver in his pocket. He said, 'What about some supper?' — not knowing how he was going to pay for it.

'That would be lovely.' She considered. 'Why don't we buy some spaghetti and some runny cheese and take them to my flat? It would be fun. It's in Hampstead. It's only a room really, but it's got its own front door so I call it a flat. It would be cheaper, you see. I expect you're broke. All my friends are always broke, it's catching.'

'I've got to be home pretty soon,' he said.

They bought the food and a bottle of wine. Fennel insisted on paying her share. Then they took a bus up to Hampstead.

It was a large, airy room, a studio and living-room combined. It had wide, long windows, looking out over a tiny garden, beyond which, at this moment, there were dripping trees, and splintering rain swaying across the street lights.

'Rain, rain, go to Spain.' She pulled the curtains together, shutting out the night. 'That's better.'

While she was cooking, he wandered round the room. He had the feeling of exploring. He was poised catlike, to sense the subtlest overtones of the life that clung to her lair. It was the first time, and the first time was important; perhaps the only time he ever had.

There was a divan in the corner, under a dull ochre-coloured

spread, dragon-embroidered in red and gold. Beside it there was a little Hepplewhite walnut table, on which was a triple silver frame with photographs: a man, her father obviously; a woman with a reflective bitter-sweet smile; and a young man with his arm round a plump fourteen-year-old Fennel. There was an old Azerbaijan carpet on the floor, a worm-eaten oaken tallboy, and a rosewood grand piano. On the broad mantelshef were carved ivory netsuke, a Meissen china monkey playing a fiddle, a tiny tortoiseshell ricksha, a small golden Buddha. There was a suggestion of everything being a part of memory, as though almost defiantly she had made her home out of those things that were left, to evoke the unlonely past. On the wall there was a cheap reproduction of the Miraculous Virgin — cut out of a magazine and framed — gold tarnished, Greek capitals blurred, black background greening. But it was the thing she had added, the thing that explained everything else — and it was like prying, to look at it. When she came back with a tray, he stood quite still as if then she would not see him.

She came and stood beside him. He felt the warmth of breath on his cheek. He turned swiftly, and she was staring at him — regarding him in the speculative, hearing way he remembered.

He said, 'I'm sopping,' flapping his sleeves to prove it.

'What ever were you thinking about, to get so wet?'

'Nothing. I wasn't thinking about anything. Nothing. I was just walking.'

There was an old dressing-gown of Ricky's that she wore about the flat. She made him put it on, so that she could dry his wet things on the pipes in the bathroom.

She brought in plates, served the spaghetti.

'Won't you pour the wine?' she said.

He opened the fiasco of Barolo as Uncle Matt might have opened a bottle of Haut Brion 1913.

'We ought to wait,' he explained. 'It ought to be warmer — *chambré*.'

'You know about wine.'

'I don't really, not Chianti. But my uncle has a very good cellar, so I've picked up a bit.'

'That's the one who was going to help you be a vet?'

'Yes.'

Yet he shook his head — almost imperceptibly; it was a movement of his mind rather than his body, but she noticed it. Her eyes were waiting, listening. He scratched the nape of his neck with a finger as if it had been a tickle.

'Your Aunt Dot said, that week-end — she was saying how disappointed they were when your father made you go into the factory.'

'That he didn't.' He got up swiftly. 'The wine. I forgot it.' He picked up the fiasco, fondled it between his hands, brought it to the table; poured it, put it back carefully.

'Just how wrong can people be — even Aunt Dot? It was up to me. Father left it to me to choose. He's awfully wise. It's so interesting there. Paint isn't just something you slap on with a brush. It's got all sorts of industrial uses — ships, cars, aeroplanes — all sorts.'

She helped him to more spaghetti.

'You'd have been a good vet,' she said. 'Animals trust you. Even dangerous ones.'

'It was only a schoolboy craze anyway — like being an engine-driver or a fireman. Aunt Dot likes to be sentimental about poor little doggies' doctors.' His voice was impenetrably airy. 'This spaghetti is marvellous,' he said socially. 'Where did you learn to do it?'

She twisted the spaghetti round her fork again and again.

'You are like Ricky,' she said slowly. 'I'm being a bore saying it so often, but you are. It's rather uncanny. You're like an animal yourself.'

'That's his photograph, isn't it?'

She nodded. 'You notice everything, too. Every tiniest thing.'

When they had finished, she slid down to sit on the floor in front of the fire, smoothing out her skirt with deliberate formality. The

firelight flickered on the pale skin of her hands, and she turned her hands slowly, as if flowing round the warmth.

'What's wrong?' she said.

He peered at the firelit shadows under the open lid of the piano, stroked a wire gently, withdrew his finger.

'Nothing.'

But when he looked at her she was gazing at him, her chin resting on her forearms crossed on the settee. Half-lit by the glow from the fire, her face had the look of a faun's: pointed and wild, disillusioned to the point of cruelty, ageless and knowing.

'Why did you walk in the rain till you were soaked?' she said.

'I was trying to make up my mind what to do.'

Suddenly he was telling her about the samples for Ballances. How they came back spoiled. 'Everyone said it was a sort of black-mail by the foreman — for a tip. I thought they were just saying it.'

He let his fingers depress a chord, without sounding it.

'But they weren't. My uncle — that's Father's brother — told the salesman to give Ballances' foreman fifty pounds.'

He ran his finger round the long curve of the raised lid of the piano.

'Do you play the piano too?' he said.

He went on, in a flat, expressionless voice: 'It's happening all the time. Once, they put the money in a paint tin and sealed it up for the foreman who would open it. Labelled "Eau de Nil".' He grinned. 'It should have been "Old Gold".'

His head was almost inside the piano lid, and his voice made a resonance with one of the strings.

'Best & Maunt have rather a name for it. Point being that my name is Maunt too. That's what's so beastly. I'm a Maunt. On my father's side, of course.'

She did not smile. She just watched him speculatively as he came out of his querencia by the piano, and prowled towards the fire.

'I'm going to resign.'

That, now, he believed. Yet it sounded unconvincing — and boastful, as if the decision were too noble for the facts.



She had noticed it. She said, 'Why don't you talk it over with your father? He'd know what to do. Wouldn't that be best?'

He reached for the Chianti.

'More?'

She put her hand over her glass. It was almost full.

He poured some wine into his own, sat down.

'Sorry,' he said. 'I interrupted.'

She turned, placing her hand beside his on the divan, comparing them. Her fingers stirred uneasily at the threads between them, blind baby water-voles nestling in a dragon's claw.

'You always do,' she said slowly. 'You have to, don't you — interrupt?' She wound her finger through his.

'Is it so terribly difficult to tell your father?'

'Why should it be difficult? Except ... except it's not awfully easy to tell someone their own brother is a dirty crook.'

It sounded as if he had a personal grudge against Uncle Alexander. 'I expect I've got it wrong somewhere,' he said, open-mindedly.

She said, 'You must leave the factory. You'll only rot away inside if you stay — hating it.'

'Oh,' he said, 'that's only my way of talking.'

When he got home his father was still up. He was sitting over the fire, but the fire was almost out. Little draughts breathed round the grey ashes in the grate, a few red embers gleamed through the shifting dust. The long green window-curtains bulged gently in the draught.

'Here. You look fagged out, boy. What on earth have you been doing?'

'Nothing, Father. I don't think.'

'You can't go killing yourself, old chap. If the job's too much for you, leave it.'

He began to lock up, with a kind of comic alacrity. Locking up was an obsession with him, but he had to deprecate it, make it seem comic in front of his son. Hugh wondered why.

He came over and put his hand on Hugh's shoulder. 'Get to bed, meanwhile. Get to bed.' He smiled.

Suddenly Hugh realized he had told Fennel a lie. A silly, spiteful lie. The sort of lie that made it impossible ever to see her again.

3 HE saw Fennel several times in the distance on the nights he went to the Poly, and he avoided her. Then one night they met on the pavement.

'I haven't left the factory,' he said.

It seemed only honest to tell her immediately.

'I've been meaning to ring you. Meaning to ring, to tell you. Last time ... about the bribery business ... I said something that — well, it wasn't quite true. I'd got hold of the wrong end of the stick, and jumped to a whole lot of conclusions. I thought I ought to tell you. Straight out.' For some reason it sounded very glib. 'I was pretty het-up, I suppose. When I got home I had a long talk with Father. You suggested that.'

He had to describe the scene in detail, so that she would know it really happened. He told her about the fire being low, his father's wanting to get to bed, the green curtains swaying.

'After I'd told him ... well ... Father rang Uncle Alex up.'

'Oh. Didn't he believe you?'

'Of course he did. Really. But he just knew Uncle Alex wouldn't do a thing like that.' It sounded very improvised, very much a sketch. 'You see, if I could make a mistake like that ... other people could too, and that would be really bad.'

'How awful.'

'No. He was terribly nice about it, awfully tactful with Uncle. I'd misheard something,' he said very quickly. 'The whole thing was too silly. Only I wanted to tell you ... to keep things straight.'

She said, gravely, 'That was sweet of you, to want to do that. Thank you.'

'So you see ... I'm staying at the factory.'

'And you wanted to escape so badly ...' She was smiling gently.

'No. No.' He must have said something to make her think that, but he could not remember. 'It's only that I hate the idea of being a salesman.'

He felt naked, discussing that sort of private thing in the middle of the street. He drew her into a coffee shop almost opposite the Poly.

Across the table, Fennel's small face gleamed in the oyster-pink glow of the lamp.

'Why don't you leave? It's so bad for you, that place. You ought to be training for something.'

'Money.'

'But you said your Uncle Matt wanted to help you ...'

He shook his head. 'I've got to think of Father.'

That had to be explained. It had sounded as if his father was being unkind.

'It isn't as if he ever thought of himself,' he said. She nodded, and it was a real communication. 'He's so humble.' She nodded again. 'Mother's family, the Jegons, were so against her marrying Father. He was a penniless painter. They said it meant disaster. I suppose it did. When I was about a year old she ran away from him.'

He made a small repressive gesture with his thumb against the table. 'She ran away with her boy friend. He was a Frenchman, an entomologist. Bugs. Families must stick together,' he said. 'She took me along. The French railways had one of their more spectacular accidents. They were killed. In a second class carriage. I seem to have survived.'

He giggled, for some reason.

'My period of greatest popularity followed. Everyone wanted to look after the pore little orfing. Aunt Bess won. I lived at Troy until I was seven. But there wasn't much point growing up to think I was a landed gentleman when I wasn't. Father's sister — that's Aunt Hilda — had come to live with him, so I could go home again — and it was about time. I was being spoiled ... So you see, I can't accept

Uncle Matt's offer about paying for me to be a vet. It's just not fair to Father. Not that he's ever said anything like that — or would. Only you've got to think of other people.' (But he had only just thought of it himself.)

'Besides,' he added, 'I wouldn't have missed being at the factory for worlds. Having to stand on my own feet — get along with all sorts and conditions — it's made a man of me.'

It sounded very silly.

He paid the bill. They walked at random then, down Regent Street, through Piccadilly Circus and Leicester Square, into Trafalgar Square, and down the dark canyon of Northumberland Avenue. She took his hand, twining her fingers through his with an impersonal gentleness. She walked lightly, almost dancing, to fit her step to his stride.

Along the Embankment the lamps bloomed yellow against the haze, and the moon was reflected in a shimmering net of light across the long ripples of the river. Dead leaves pattered restlessly along the paving stones.

An old shapeless man settled his possessions, stuffed newspaper inside his clothes, lay down on a slatted green bench to sleep. They walked down on to the landing stairs by Cleopatra's Needle.

She said, 'That poor old man.'

A tug hooted, the chuntering black shape slid downstream, the little waves of the wake slapped madly against the stone.

'That's how I shall end too,' he said suddenly. It sounded very affected. 'If I go on as I've begun. But I'd like it. You'd be free. You couldn't sink any lower. Almost anything you did would be right; even murder or stealing would raise you.'

She would not take him seriously.

'You can always come to my house,' she said. 'You can mark it with chalk: a cross or a circle — whatever they put for "This is a good house".'

There was a piece of chalk in his pocket. He had been marking barrels of stand-oil with it during the day. He scrawled a large circle with a dart in it on the coping.

'I've been practising. That's what they put for "This is a good house".'

She traced over the mark with her forefinger. 'Let's put a half-crown in that poor old man's hat, so that when he wakes up he can pay for a bed or a meal.'

He peered round the lamp standard at the old man stretched out with his bowler hat tipped forward to keep the light out of his eyes.

'Can't put it in his hat,' he said. 'He's using it as a nightcap.'

'Put it in his stocking, then — like Father Christmas.'

'Bedsocks.'

He tiptoed forward, put half a crown by the old man's little string bag; and wondered if he had left himself money enough to get through the week.

'He's probably got a wad of notes stuffed in the lining of all his coats. They usually have.'

She said passionately, 'How can you say that? It's so middle-class. So mean. I'd rather give, and be taken in. I thought you would too.'

'I know, though. I've got them, myself.'

She swung round, leaning out over the parapet, gazed down at the black sleek river sucking past, sliding black and silver past.

'If I were like that poor old man — with no one to love or care for — that's what failure is — I wouldn't want to live. I wouldn't live. Just one person.'

'Of course.'

'It would be so easy. To slip down and float away ... So gentle and kind.' She said suddenly, 'Hugh, take me away.'

When they climbed the steps again there was a top-hatted man hurrying towards them. He was in evening dress, a camellia in his buttonhole. Hugh doffed his hat to him.

'Excuse me, sir, I'm afraid they're all taken tonight.' He waved, it might have been at the green benches and the tramps; dropped his voice confidentially: 'There are still a few free a little farther along. Past the bridge.'

The man halted nonplussed, said, 'Er — thank you. Past the

bridge? Thank you, thank you very much,' and hurried away, looking hastily over his shoulder.

'Just part of our service, sir.'

Fennel was enchanted. 'Does he really sleep on a bench?'

'Has for years.'

'Does he always have the same seat?'

'There's his country seat — in Hyde Park.'

They wandered along to Westminster Bridge, and round past the Houses of Parliament, and Whitehall, and into St James's Park. In the moonlight the Foreign Office floated over the haze, and the bridge across the lake glimmered through a thin mist. A duck quacked sleepily. There was no other sound except the distant throbbing traffic.

'It's like Venice,' she whispered. 'I wish we were in Venice.' She shut her eyes.

He said, 'Is Venice a place — or a time?'

She turned towards him with a sigh of intimacy. She was twisting a button on his coat.

'That's clever of you. It's just a place.'

'We'll catch the 9.40 gondola. There's the Foreign Office for passports.'

'Oh Hugh, it's been such fun — you see things so much bigger than life-size.' She stood back from him. 'Except when you want to be a tramp.'

When he let himself in, the parish church clock was chiming eleven, exactly as if he had come home from the Poly. Hilda was in the sitting-room darning socks. He kissed her, warmly and affectionately. She looked up surprised, and he knew he had given himself away.

While he ate his supper she probed delicately, and he parried her questions with factual-seeming evasions, that would sound true even if she knew more than he thought she did.

At last she put down the socks, folding them deliberately. In her lap her hands made a tiny sketch of maternally comforting arms.



'You've been seeing a girl, haven't you?'

She waited for him to confess. It was as if she longed for the warmth of the forgiveness and trust that sometimes, momentarily, when he was small, they had shared. Moments that afterwards always seemed shameful to him, as though to confide in her was a final, disintegrating disloyalty.

'What about that girl — the musician — you said you met at Uncle Kingston's?' she said — so casually.

He almost laughed in her face. He had never mentioned a girl.

'How is Aunt Dot? I should have written. I forgot.'

'That was rude. She said you'd made quite a hit with this girl.'

'Oh — Carol? Did I?' he said.

'Was that the name? Why don't you invite her one Sunday so that we can meet her?'

He poured himself another cup of tea.

'I don't think I liked Carol very much, Aunt Hilda.'

Watching her with casual, smiling eyes, he knew the danger was past.

'Aunt Dot said she didn't think she was a very nice sort of girl. Diana said she had a very bad reputation.'

'Like me,' he said, and nearly spoiled it all.

He could never see Fennel again, of course, after that.

But they had arranged to spend Sunday together.

It must be their last day.

He told Hilda that if it were fine on Sunday, he might cycle down to Troy. To prove that he had absolutely no motive for going, he went on: 'I don't know. If it's fine I might just as well mess about at home. I've got masses of things to do.'

'It will do you good to get some air.'

Gloomily, he completed the trick. 'You know I hate exercise, Auntie. I'll see how I feel.'

On Sunday everything worked like a charm.

Aubrey, blinking sleepily in a dressing-gown, came up to his room and woke him at six.

'If you're going, why not make an early start?' he said. 'It's much too nice a day to waste in town. The ride will do you good.'

He hardly remembered to seem unwilling.

It was a lovely day — hazy, with a promise of autumn heat — and he felt an added exhilaration because he had been so damned clever.

He knew what he must do. He would take Fennel to Troy. But first they would go to Arthur's Seat, and there, with her to interpret, in that secret place of childhood, they would find and acknowledge the real Hugh — the old Hugh who was honest and brave; and he would never need to lie again — to her, to anybody.

When they reached Amberley they stood talking to Duley the stationmaster, until the hikers had reached the shoulder of the down above. Then he led the way up the thin, straggling path of chalk, like a rough stair, that went up Camp Hill. He was tense with excitement, he could not talk.

They skirted the chalkpit at the top, and the spinney. They climbed over the old wall, the clotted flint and mortar crumbling under their feet, and stepped into the road. It was cold there, and their breath hung on the air like smoke.

The sunlight, straw-coloured, fell through the heavy leaf-smelling air between the trees, slanting light without warmth. The tree trunks were misted with green: green against corrugated grey. A pigeon scuffled among dead leaves and flew off, its wings creaking.

Right inside the wood he stopped by the old hornbeam. The soil had fallen away and the furry, lichened roots stood arched over chalky flints in the hole. He got into the pit, and bent down; rolled away two large stones.

'It's a bit frightening, but it's quite safe,' he said. 'It's a prehistoric flint mine.'

She followed him down, wriggling through the hole into the low, narrow passage, clean-cut as the Stone Age miners had left it four thousand years ago.

The sun shone through holes in the chalk, and the white chalk

reflected the light so that the little half-moon-shaped gallery was radiant — the walls, the flints, glowing with silvery, pearly light, like the inside of a cloud on a sunny day. At the end of the gallery a fall of earth had left a wider hole, and looking through it they could see the tops of trees, and, immensely distant, like a reflection of the haze of light inside, the haze where sky and sea met. He led her to the gap, and they crawled through on to a wide, rounded ledge of the down, where lady's tresses were flowering.

She did not speak. High above them were trees, and below them were trees, their highest branches almost at a level with the ledge. To one side a buttress of turf cut them off from the quarry, to the other, bramble bushes; and the sharp downward slope into the combe guarded them.

He watched her as she took it all in, looking over the winding Arun towards the sea.

'I used to call it my castle.'

She seemed to be waiting. But suddenly, there was nothing to tell her. It was just silly and childish and embarrassing to have come.

He threw a flint in a flat arc to skim the twigs of the trees below. 'The Never-Never Land,' he said. 'Introducing bloody little Peter Pan and the Lost Boys.' He flicked a hand towards a stand of toadstools. 'Pull up a Sweaty Death Cap and sit down.'

She smoothed her skirt. A late-staying wheatear came near to investigate.

'What's that one called?' she asked gently.

'Wheatear. The old downland shepherds used to trap them in little stone traps, and make pies of them.'

'Poor little chaps.'

She sat pleating and folding her skirt; the wheatear pecked vigorously at a blackberry; church bells were ringing changes somewhere towards Arundel.

'We could stay here for a bit if it doesn't bore you,' he said. 'It's quite safe. Nobody'll come up here. The locals are scared of the pharisees in the wood, and the trippers are leary of the quarry.'

'Your secret castle.'

'You're the only person in the world who knows about it. Even Uncle Matt doesn't know.'

But he had brought his father, once.

He flung himself down on the bank beside her. An old man on a high, old-fashioned bicycle moved steadily along the invisible slot of road between the hedgerows below. The rector.

'What's he like — your uncle?'

The rector disappeared. There would be another target in the shooting gallery in a moment. One would aim at the edge of the gap in the hedgerows, and pick them off, one by one, with a rifle.

'Uncle Matt? Oh, he looks like a human being — more like a human being than most, in fact. Only he doesn't have any thoughts at all.'

She must have stirred, because he said, 'No, it's true. He has things in his mind ... as they really are, somehow — solid, as if his mind were round them; so he doesn't need to think or have opinions. He just understands. Either he understands or he isn't interested. Then I don't think he knows they exist. Father calls him the noble savage.'

Another bicycle in the slot ... a woman ... not so steady ... the district nurse.

'Jean — that's my cousin — used to say it didn't matter what you wrote in a letter to him, he only read between the lines. I ran away once. He was the only person who didn't make a fuss. All he said was he thought it was a good idea to be independent, but one could start too young. We had a long talk; walking round the stables. He reckoned I'd saved him half a crown a day by not being there to eat his food. So he gave me seven and sixpence. I told him I'd taken a lot of stuff from the larder. We worked out it was about half a crown's worth. So I gave him back one half-crown. It was all settled. He never mentioned it again.'

An ant crawled up a blade of grass.

'How old were you then?'

'Seven — six and a half. People make an awful fuss when a kid runs away. Every small boy ought to run away. Make a man of

him. Pitch him in and he'll drown.' He pressed a finger deep into the moss between them.

She said, without urgency, so that it was part of the sunlight, and the clouds, and the moss, and the ant crawling up the blade of grass: 'Did he?'

It was a Yellow Ant — *Acanthomyops flava* — probably a slave. He had noticed a nest of Blood-Red Ants coming through the wood. He poked the ant with a blade of grass. It swung round the stalk and fell off. 'He's a professional survivor.'

'Why did you run away?'

The ant struggled through a tiny jungle of turf back to the stalk of couch grass and began to climb it. It was a persevering little beast. Just to teach it a lesson he tipped it off the grass blade again.

He rolled on his back. 'You look quite different from upside-down. Your hair's a beard, and your eyes are a kind of double mouth, and you're bald on your chin.'

In one complicated bound he leapt to his feet.

'I had the whale of a time, really. Preying on the countryside. Making wheatear pie. Shooting rabbits, curing the skins for the winter. Thinking how sad it was for them — wondering if I were dead. I'll show you something.'

He crawled back into the gallery, and came back with the duelling pistols.

She watched him while he unwrapped the oilskin cover he had stitched ages ago, to cover the long, flat, polished mahogany case. He opened the case.

Under their protecting layer of grease the pistols shone rustless against the blue velvet lining of the box. The powder in its flask, the shot in their slots, were dry and good.

'For preying,' he said.

As he sat down, an old yellow envelope planed across the air to Fennel.

'What's that?' he said.

'It's just fallen out of the box.'

He opened it idly. There was a photograph inside. Faded, hardly

distinguishable, it was pocked with tiny black and green spots of damp. It stank. But he had forgotten. Swiftly he slid it back into the envelope and looked up. She was watching.

He held out the envelope to her. 'A photograph of my mother,' he said. 'It might interest you.'

She turned the envelope over. It was too late to do anything about it, but he had just remembered. On the envelope in childish printed characters was: 'TO BE BURIED WITH ME IN THE EVENT OF MY DEATH.'

'Dramatic little beasts, children,' he said. 'I must have read that in a book.'

She was looking at the photograph. 'I expect so.'

He began to clean the duelling pistols.

Her eyes followed his movements with a sort of drowsy speculativeness. 'Did you know about her lover when you ran away?'

'No,' he said firmly. But his head nodded.

He worked obsessively over the blued chased barrels, teasing out traces of rust from the devices.

She said, 'You could live here for ever without anyone knowing.' He nodded. 'You always have.'

'I suppose so.'

She caught her breath. 'Preying on the countryside?' Then she said, 'There's no other way, while you live here, is there?'

She looked away. She patted the ground beside her. 'Food,' she said quickly. 'I'm starving.'

They had lunch in silence, and then piled the crumbs for the wheatears.

The sun went round across the sea. The air was warm and slow. The only sounds were those from far off, drifting percussive on the fringe of peace: a train's tiny explosive roar, a woman's laugh, an axe against a tree, a church clock striking.

He glanced at her. Her eyes were closed. Asleep, she seemed fragile, and alone; and he was filled with a longing to protect her.

She had kicked off her shoes. He took the plaid rug she had brought, and covered her toes with it, gently.



After a while, he cached the pistols in the split in the gallery. When he went out to the ledge again she was awake.

'It's so peaceful here,' she said. 'You're different, too, like you were when we first met. In the wood.' She counted his fingers in her hand. 'Why are you different?' she said, peevishly.

'Because there aren't any mirrors,' he said. 'No reflections at all.'

They went down to the house, but Aunt Bess and Uncle Matt and Jean were all in town. Only Mrs Timewell was there, and she got them tea. Hugh suggested having supper in her housekeeper's room with her, later; but she would not hear of it, and laid dinner in the dining-room. She gave Hugh the keys of the cellar, and he went down to get a bottle of wine.

When he came up, Fennel was upstairs, and Timey gave him a piece of her mind. 'The very idea,' she said. 'Bringing a nice young lady like that to the kitchen.'

It was reassuring to know that Timey approved of Fennel.

'Would you be sweet on her, Master Hugh?' she said. But that was the sort of thing Timey did say.

Before dinner, while it was still light, Hugh showed Fennel the stables. And he showed her Moonraker, and told her how he had bought him.

'It was a shocking thing to do,' he said. He had seen the colt at Lewes Market. 'It was love at first sight. I sold Uncle's dogcart and the harness and the cob on the spot, and bought him for eighty guineas. I had to have him.' He sighed. 'He's beautifully bred, though he's got the filthiest temper. That's the Barcaldine line. His sire killed a man, and his great grandsire. But he's a stayer, and he's a born steeplechaser. Uncle called me a crook for selling his gear and his horse. He was livid. But it wasn't a row. He understood. He was glad I'd done it, even when he was angry. We'd win the National with that horse, if I didn't have to work for my living.'

He turned away.

'Perhaps I will yet. If the horse doesn't kill me first. Or selling paint.'

They had dinner under the big portrait.

'Hugh Jegon, my great grandfather.' He waited for her to say how like he was to the painting.

She said it slowly: 'You *are* like him.'

'I'm always supposed to be — so's Jean. He died of a broken neck hunting when he was eighty-three. The point being that for sixty years of that time, he had no legs. Two wooden stumps. And he never let it stop him doing anything. Hunting, even dancing — he married a dancer — a French girl. He fought two duels. He had all sorts of bees in his bonnet. He hated railways, so as long as there were stage coaches, he drove a stage twice a week. From Arundel to Pulborough. He used to have a man wheel him round in a wheelbarrow so he could go shooting. Tough as old boots. Facts were there to be ignored, by a man of spirit ... 'I'd like to be like him, more than anything in the world.'

He paused.

'He wrote poetry, too. Awful doggerel, I think. Every day he wrote a little poem for his wife. He adored her. When she died they found them all, tied up with ribbon.'

After dinner Fennel made him play to her. He found himself playing an early Chopin nocturne. Slow, aristocratic, romantic, it fitted his mood exactly; and he played it very well indeed — so well that he was surprised himself.

'Play it again, Hugh,' she said. 'So lovely, and young, and dreaming.'

He shook his head.

'I couldn't do it again. That's being an amateur, not being able to do it twice.'

The clock in the corner erupted into chimes.

'Nine o'clock,' he said. 'Time to put it away.'

'Put your game away, Hugh,' she said pleasantly.

Then, in a very practical, hard sort of voice, she said: 'That's all it is. A game to be put away. Me; winning the National; wheatear pie; and running away; being like your great grandfather; and being a vet. It's only a game.'

'Is it?' He was aghast. 'No, Fennel.'

She stared at him blankly. 'It is.' Then fretfully: 'I won't be made game of, Hugh.'

He laughed, and she was furious.

He said, 'Snakes and ladders or halma? Or do you prefer to be beggar my neighbour? We could play snap with the ancestral portrait!'

And suddenly they were laughing.

On the way home, sitting in opposite window seats of an empty carriage, he told her about his savings pot. He was proving, to her and to himself, that it was not a game. Yet, as soon as he heard himself saying it, it only sounded naive.

'I've worked it all out very carefully,' he added. 'In exactly forty-two years, seven months, and five days — when I'm sixty-two — I shall have saved enough to enter the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. The result of a lifetime of self-denial — I shall just be old enough to be a bore about that.'

'Hugh, you make me so cross sometimes. That's probably the most sensible thing you've ever done, and you make it sound silly.'

'It's wheatear pie on the grandest scale. Or do I mean the smallest?'

She stared at him, as if to see and hear into him, to separate the faint true note from the discords.

'You'd make a marvellous vet. But ... if I had a thing like that, I'd never stop till I brought it off. I'd be a salesman even though I detested it, if it was the quickest way to bring in money so I could do what I wanted. I'd eat bread and cheese to save.'

'I do,' he said briefly.

It was nearly true.

'But I'd be a salesman,' she said. 'And a good one.'

'That's why I'm at the factory.'

She flushed. 'I'm being maternal and encouraging, and you hate that, don't you?'

He nodded.

'Nobody's allowed to be maternal any more,' she said. 'But you're so ashamed of being sensible.'

The train was rolling into Victoria.

'If you sold lots of paint ... it can't be so difficult, everyone uses paint for all sorts of things.'

He screwed up his nose, reached for her bag on the rack. The train stopped.

On the platform she said: 'What does it matter how awful it is — selling paint — if you get what you want in the end? You are funny. You don't relate things. You only do things because you have to do them at that moment. You're always in a state of crisis; always stopping up leaks in the boat instead of rowing. Oh dear ... I'm mothering you again.'

'I like it.' But he felt absurdly inadequate and inexperienced.

She swept round in a sort of mocking pirouette; leaned forward and kissed him swiftly on the corner of the mouth.

'You're so sweet,' she said. 'So sweet and stupid. I'll have to reform you.'

She swung her raffia bag in a wide circle, and slipped away down the platform.

It seemed typical, that no sooner had he really made up his mind to make a very great deal of money very quickly by selling paint for Best & Maunt, than his uncle sent for him to tell him that as he had learned on all sides that he was reluctant to become a salesman, he had, not without difficulty, made a job for him in the factory. In America — he managed to make that sound like a sneer — a big firm, Dupont de Nemours, had marketed a revolutionary kind of paint — a cellulose paint — which, once applied, only needed polishing to give as good results as all but the best coach painting.

'Weather does not affect it. Only polish it, and the surface is as good as, even better than, when it was first applied. I need hardly tell you how serious a threat this is to our coach varnish business.'

He had persuaded the board to entrust Hugh, despite his

inexperience, with the task of making the firm's new cellulose lacquer ... Lucalac.

The board had obtained the services of a brilliant research chemist, a man who knew more about introcellulose and solvents than anyone in England outside Nobels.

'But his knowledge is purely theoretical. You will supply the practical side. You will report to me. I'll keep you on the right lines.'

He met Dr Samuels that evening. Alexander took them both to dinner, and left them alone afterwards.

Samuels looked like a cheap plaster bust of Beethoven — a Beethoven with curly red hair — and he had a boisterous habit of talking about the person he was talking to, which was very disconcerting.

Samuels watched Alexander as he left them. 'Your name is Maunt too. Do I draw the obvious conclusions?'

'He's only my uncle.'

'Apparently I do. Shall I call you Nepos? I think it suits you. You are a conformist — at the highest level, of course. Tell me — while you were treating your uncle with such well-bred deference, I had an idea that you despised him?'

One said, 'Oh, Uncle's all right.'

Samuels persisted. 'Perhaps you're ashamed because he's a humbug?'

'That's just his way. He's rather nice, really.'

'I've got it, my evasive young friend. You're ashamed of him, because he's not a gentleman.'

One decided that the man was a bounder, and did not answer.

Samuels shrugged his shoulders. 'Let's get out of this bourgeois hole before I say something quite unpardonable. What about the Corner House? We might pick up a couple of girls.'

'I ought to be getting home.'

Samuels bared his brilliant white teeth. 'Girls being vulgar too?'

'Isn't that the point?' one inquired, and at once Samuels was friendlier.



There was a tiny room above the cooper's stores, reached by a long flight of iron steps. It was no bigger than a store cupboard. Fifty years before, when the space below had been the paint mill room, it had been the manager's office. Now it was cleared out, and a bench was installed with lab equipment, a centrifuge and a small ball mill. The sign painters painted 'NO ADMITTANCE' on the door, and Hugh began to work.

Dupont had experimented for years, before they marketed their product. Alexander gave Samuels and Hugh two months. In the end, Lucalac reached the market only a month after the date Alexander had scheduled.

It was a good product; not as good as its American counterpart, not as good as its advertising claimed, but good enough to be proud of. Hugh had contributed quite a lot to the final formula, and Samuels insisted on giving him full credit, not only with Alexander, but also with the board. As a result, Hugh was put in sole charge of the four men working in the new department.

He was contented — or so he told himself, earnestly. He was getting five pounds a week now — that meant only six years to wait. He had saved forty-two pounds already, and his father was pleased because he was making his way.

It seemed strange it should be difficult to tell Fennel. In the end, he took her out to dinner in Soho. He told her it was a celebration. When he had ordered a meal and wine, feeling very grown-up and sophisticated, Fennel looked round the room: at the discreet lighting, the small tables, the people, sitting two and two, leaning over not-too-clean tablecloths, with eyes only for each other.

'This is nice,' she said. 'The sort of place Mummy always called a Noah's Ark.'

A white rabbit of a man was gazing down the neckline of a large-bosomed woman in a rabbitskin coat, at a near-by table.

'And the coney and the female after his kind,' she said.

Almost without noticing it, he told her.

When he had finished she said, 'Isn't that good, Hugh! That's marvellous, isn't it?'



She swung the wine round in the glass, looking at him over the rim; and the lines of her face were as transparent and fragile as the dark rim of the glass. She put it down exactly in the dented ring in the cloth where it had been before.

'It's very good, isn't it. Because you're really terribly young to manage a department.'

'You don't sound very pleased.'

'I am, Hugh, of course I am. If it's what you want.'

The words seemed to slant off with an almost audible click.

His palm rolled the bread into long worms.

'I don't see why I shouldn't have five pounds a week now, soon as the next man, while I'm waiting to go on the road. It all helps.'

But her face, half turned away, seemed small and wizened.

'Isn't that so?' he said.

She looked at him and smiled. 'Darling Hugh. Why be so explaining? I only want you to be happy. Don't be a silly old explaining old goose.'

'Can't help it.' He made a long lugubrious face like a hissing goose. 'You've got to have something to say "boo" to.'

She laughed. It was all right.

They went to a concert, walking through shut, silent streets to the Queen's Hall.

There was only one item in the programme — Bach's 'Art of Fugue', in an orchestral version. Fennel was contemptuous of transcriptions, but it was the only concert that week. He hoped they would not be bored. Instead, when the end came, he was drunk with the exhilaration of following the closely woven relentless strands of melody, and he wanted to shout and sing. He felt he had never been so excited in his life.

He turned to Fennel, but she was sitting looking at the emptying gilt chairs, and her face was a still mask, with tears on it.

He put his arm round her shoulders, but she said sharply: 'Don't,' and then a little later, 'Hanky.'

When they came out, they walked in the shadowed empty moonlight of Portland Place, and up past the white colonnades of

Regent's Park. She fell into step humbly, almost submissively, beside him, taking his hand, twining her fingers tightly round his. Her fingers were dry plastic icicles against his. He glanced swiftly and away — he felt as if he were spying — and saw that she was looking straight ahead; her face was calm and undistorted; and in the moonlight, tears glittered.

He lifted her hand to tuck her arm under his, but she pulled it free. She had shut him out; and suddenly that coldness, that shattering of their intimacy, was only unfair and cruel.

Angrily he called a cab, bundled her into it, and got in beside her.

'What about your last train?' she said. 'The last train?'

He had been thinking of that, of the chain of lies that would have to follow if he missed it; so he said, fiercely: 'Damn the last train.' He felt that that must prove beyond all doubt how deeply her trouble had touched him.

He put an arm round her shoulders protectingly. She pushed him away with little fluttering fists, saying, 'Oh, leave me alone. Why can't you leave me alone.'

When they reached her flat he took the key, let her in, and said firmly: 'You get to bed. I'll make you some tea.'

While the kettle boiled he scouted round and found a hot water bottle. He filled that, taking it in with the tea. He straightened the bed, set the tray on her lap, solicitous, deft.

She said, with the gentle, impersonal smile of tiredness, 'What a wonderful bedside manner you have.'

He said, in a pleased voice, 'Have I?'

She considered him gravely.

'You're so terribly conceited, aren't you, Hugh? Terribly conceited.'

She spoke so friendly, so objectively, that resentment died almost as it flared up, and he felt humble, and rather holy, as in the confessional.

'I suppose I am,' he sighed. 'I don't know how not to be. I don't know how not to think of me.'

'You make everything a sort of confidence trick, by being so

conceited,' she said slowly. 'When we got into the cab you weren't thinking about me at all. You never even asked me why I was crying.'

'That's not fair.' He had been sitting on the end of the bed, and he got up. She patted the flat place beside her legs, and he sat down again. 'I didn't ask because it — well, it seemed like prying.'

'Delicate Hugh.'

She took his hand and traced out the blue veins on the back of it with one long fluid finger.

'Silly Hugh. You didn't want it to look as though you were prying. I might have wanted you to pry, wanted to resent you prying, wanted you to have the guts to go on prying until I told you, and got rid of it all. No. You were sweet and kind and gentle, and it didn't mean anything at all.'

He said miserably, 'I wanted you to know that I could look after you when something was wrong, without any question, any afterthoughts. That's why I stayed when you wanted me to go.'

'Hugh, why do you always have to stage-manage people?'

'I am such an awful failure.'

He felt, more than ever, lonely, and shut out, and lost. He bent down over her hand, and with his face half hidden in the turned-down sheet he kissed it.

She stroked his head; but she said, 'Stop being silly, Hugh.'

He sat up. 'Sorry. It must be because I am in love with you.'

As he said it, he wondered if he was.

She said, 'I wonder. Are you really?'

Looking at him, she was listening to his thoughts.

'Dear Hugh. You're so helpless, and so very dear.' She said, with slow formality, 'I do hope you are — more than anything in the world.' Then she said, 'There' — and, reaching out to normality, found the schoolroom phrase. 'I'm sorry it's been such a wet evening for you.'

He hesitated, wishing to do the right thing.

'Why were you crying, Fennel?' he said at last.

'Over what I've just told you.'

'But ... it wasn't till after you were crying — that I failed you.'

She pulled a face.

'You're always so dramatic,' she said. 'It's silly. You didn't fail me. Not just like that. No, it's been in my mind, hidden away, but I only knew while they were playing. You were so excited by the music, and I think I was happy because we could really share that. You were in the music with me, and that was lovely; and I was thinking how I always wanted to share things with you; and how you seem willing to share when you say things, but the things you do, you do all by yourself, or for your father, not me; and I wondered if I was getting too fond of you. I was frightened because you might just be a broken reed ... You're not a broken reed, are you? You're not. It's only that it's a difficult time for you, isn't it?'

'I expect so,' he said.

On his way downstairs, something struck him as odd. He had just told a girl he loved her, and he had not even tried to kiss her.

4 WHEN Hugh got to the factory next day, Wally the gateman was not in his usual place. There were no early birds waiting for the last hooter. The noise seemed different, too; thinner, like a mere skin of sound, as though the mills were free-wheeling because there was nobody to put them into gear.

He hurried through the yard. It was empty, with an echoing emptiness that had a quality almost of anger. Unattended, the Clydesdales breathed horns of steam on the cold air.

In the Cellulose, three of his four men stood in a little group by the switchgear. But the belts were not running. The men had not changed into overalls. When they saw him they looked furtive, but they did not move to start work.

They said, 'Good morning,' they watched him as he went to the

switch and put on the current. The motors hummed and the belts squeaked as they picked up speed. When he turned back, they had not stirred. They were staring at him like boys on a street corner.

'What's wrong with everybody? Are we having a strike?' Then, 'Where's Tom Oliver? Not like Tom to be late.'

The man they called Poke said:

'Mean to say you ain't 'eard? Tom, and Wally from the Varnish. On the danger list the pair of them.'

'What?'

'You know old Newport arst him to do a late shift in the Varnish, them being short 'anded. Middle of the night it was. A batch of gold size flashed, and his overalls caught afire.'

Poke went on slowly:

'E was alight like a candle, like a bleedin' candle. Like a bleedin' wax candle. In agony he musta been. Wally couldn't put out the flames. Put himself out, Tom did. 'E jumped in the tank where they clean the cans. Not the water tank. The corstic tank.'

Jack Smith said:

'They couldn't find the wet blankets. For why? Cos there ain't none. Should be wet blankets 'anging in every varnish 'ouse. That's the Factory Act.'

Poke nodded. 'There's other things.' His eyes fell away, veiled, dropping past the hanging overalls — three blue, deflated, headless manikins hanging in a row. Poke said, 'Tom didn't have a chanst.'

The words, the look, drifted past Hugh's understanding.

Harry James said:

'Dirty overalls. His overalls full of bleedin' cellulose, full of bleedin' gun cotton. Impre'nated.' He made a little explosion with his hands.

'We ain't had no clean overalls for a mumf,' Jack Smith said. 'Working with cellulose there ought to be clean overalls every week. That's er Factory Act, Mr Maunt.'

There was a splash of maroon cellulose on the wall, maroon

against dirty white. A whirring belt drew a dark wave on the air around it.

Hugh heard himself say, 'I've asked for clean overalls every day ... I've asked and asked, Jack.'

Poke said, 'Arst!' as if he were spitting. 'Didn't do Tom much good, did it, mate?'

Hugh stared at him, white-faced.

'No,' he said weakly.

But Poke, turning roughly, emotionally away, jostled him, and at once courage came back — a sort of anger that it seemed he could always rely on. He said: 'Now — we'll get to work.'

Poke stared at him, but took off his coat and put on his dirty overalls. So did the others. Hugh gave out mixing slips for the day's work, then he slipped out to speak to Jim Boylan.

Jim said there was a chance Tom might live. It was long odds, but he might pull through. Wally — apart from burned hands, Wally was all right. But Tom was a very ill man.

Hugh said, 'Jim, you've heard about the overalls?'

Jim nodded.

Hugh moistened his lips.

'Jim, it was — it was my fault. I've asked for clean overalls — I ask every week. But if I'd stuck to my guns and got them — Jim, everything would still be all right. Tom would have been all right ... Wouldn't he, Jim?'

Jim looked at him oddly.

'That's more than mortal man can say, Mr Hugh.'

'I ought to have insisted. The men think ...'

Jim spat. 'A pack of old women.' He guided Hugh towards the door; towards reality. 'Barrack-room lawyers, Mr Hugh, like the Israelites when they was looking for their scapegoat.'

'Jim, isn't there something I can do? ... For Mrs Oliver, I mean? ...'

Jim shook his head slowly. 'From what they say, Tom had no chance. No blankets. No first aid. Overalls full of gun cotton as an H.E. shell. But whose fault — that's different. There's a lot of talk about negligence ... and there'll be a lot more. Mr Hugh ... the



lads're taking up a subscription for a lawyer. I'm giving you the tip, you and me being friends.'

Hugh said, 'Jim, what should I do?'

'Take an old soldier's advice, Mr Hugh, keep a still tongue in your head.'

'But ... Jim.'

'You asked for the overalls. Is that in writing?'

Hugh nodded.

'You've got your duplicate?'

'Yes, Jim, but it doesn't make any difference.'

'It does, boy.'

All the morning there were rumours.

'... When they took 'is shirt off at the 'orspital, skin of 'is chest drew off, like an undervest ...'

'They've put blankets up now in the varnish house. Lockin' the bleedin' stable after the 'orse is gone ...'

... Tom was rallying — Tom was making a fight for it —

The first aid box had been locked ... Wally had wrenched it off its hinges, but he couldn't open it.

... The board had offered Tom's widow a thousand pounds to keep her mouth shut ...

'... It was the overalls ... full of cellulose, mate, they were.'

... Tom was dead ...

... Jim had been with him when he died.

'You might say he died in my arms. God rest his poor soul,' Jim said. 'My Sarah, she had taken May out for a cup of tea. Them being sisters, you see. It was only across the road, she was in the caff there and they sent for her, but he had gone before she came.'

Hugh said, 'Jim, I'm so sorry.'

'She struck him, Mr Hugh.' Jim's puzzled voice came slowly. 'She struck him. Though the life had left him, she had still to hurt him — that in her own right mind, would not hurt a fly.' Jim sighed. 'She was abusing him for dying and leaving her uncared for, and the children, and she struck him; as if he'd spent her wages, her standing there dry-eyed, and he was dead.'

Later the runner brought a memo, telling Hugh to report to his uncle's office at six.

He stood outside Alexander's office, waiting, as the six o'clock hooter was sounding. He knocked, and then he was facing them.

They were all there — Old Best and his son; Uncle Alexander; two men he did not know, who seemed to be members of the board; Major Newport; Mr Bernard. They were standing unrelated around the room, Best staring at the corner of the desk, his son staring out of the window, Bernard and Newport looking at the floor. One of the unknown men had his hand on the telephone. There was a feeling of an awkward pause: they had been waiting for him — the embarrassing item on the agenda.

Uncle Alex said, 'Ah Hugh,' and motioned him to stand with Bernard and Newport.

Young Best said, 'He was experienced, this chap Oliver? Fit to be in charge?'

The man at the telephone said, 'There should be notices everywhere. Any man caught smoking — instant dismissal.'

The guv'nor said, 'He's been here twelve years,' and Newport chipped in just before Bernard: 'That's right, sir.'

Alexander cleared his throat.

'You will have heard by now, Hugh, that Oliver, who was in your department, was injured last night, and has died.'

He paused. Everyone was silent.

'We have the unpleasant duty of discovering the cause of the accident.'

At least come clean.

One pace forward.

'I wanted to see you about that, sir.'

Old Best looked up suddenly. 'Do you know anything about all this?'

'It must have been his overalls, sir. I am supposed to draw clean overalls every week. I haven't drawn any for a month.'

Old Best's face was impassive. He was looking down at the desk, and in his pocket his hand was clicking his small change.

Go on man and get it over.

'The overalls he was wearing were thick with cellulose, sir. Like touch paper. It was my fault, sir. I did not draw clean overalls.'

Young Best stole a glance, curious to see what criminal negligence looked like.

Old Best said heavily, sadly: 'Some poor devil has to be killed because you're too slack to do your job. Those dirty overalls must have been the poor chap's death warrant.'

One must not make any excuses. If Uncle Alexander wanted to hide ... let him. But he must not hide, himself.

Alexander was speaking.

'It doesn't arise, sir. Oliver was wearing the spare varnish house pair.'

He gestured towards a chair by the desk. Draped over the back were Tom's overalls.

There was the wide slash of yellow across the seat, where Tom had wiped his palette knife three weeks ago; there was the torn, red-stained pocket where Tom had caught it up-ending a barrel of lithol red. Those were Tom's overalls. They had not gone up like a bleeding candle.

'It should be automatic. To change overalls every week.'

But across the desk the unknown man smiled at him, almost encouragingly. If you were prepared to take your punishment it was always all right.

The guv'nor stared impassively. Explained. He wanted him to do a series of flashpoint tests, to tabulate the temperature at which all the different solvents used in the varnish house would explode.

'Isn't that a job for the lab, sir?'

'They test the stuff when we buy it. I want an independent check. Of what's there now. At the moment I don't want to go outside the firm.'

Alexander said, 'I'm pretty certain I'm right, sir. We haven't to look any farther than the butt end of a cigarette.'

The man at the telephone said, 'But surely that's irregular?'

'They smuggle tobacco in. You can't stop them. They smoke in the latrines — by the canal.'

Best paid himself five coins: click; click; click; click; click. 'I hope you're right,' he said dispiritedly. 'I must go and see the man's wife.'

He looked at Hugh.

'Don't go blabbing this all over the place, young Hugh. I don't want everyone nattering all through the factory.'

Hugh said, 'Of course not, sir.'

As he went out, he heard Alexander saying soothingly: 'It's only talk, sir. Just talk. They don't really believe what they say. It's something to talk about,' and Best's voice saying, 'A man's been killed. Do you expect them not to talk about it?'

When he got home, Hilda thought he was ill. He had to tell her about it.

She was shocked by the story, but only shocked. Her face made horrified grimaces as he spoke, as if she could see the thing happening in front of her and was reacting. She went on setting the table, as if to hold it all at a distance. She said, 'That poor man, Hugh. How dreadful.'

So he told her about the overalls.

'... I did have the guts to tell old Best it was my fault. I told him, and all the time Tom Oliver's overalls were lying spread out on a chair in front of me. In front of me.'

'You confessed how careless you had been?'

Her voice was gentle, but she hesitated over placing a spoon, and he sensed that she did not really believe him.

'Of course, Auntie. When in doubt, tell the truth. Anyway, I hadn't the guts to lie.'

She lifted her eyes from the table, looking at him as if trying to fit the evidence into her picture of him.

He said, 'At the time, I thought I'd made good at last — I'd helped the family kill a man.'

She laid the carving knife on a rest like a tiny saw-horse.  
'You'd better go and wash,' she said. 'Your father will be in soon.'

Next morning, when he was in the varnish house yard, collecting the samples for test from the tanks, Jim Boylan came across to speak to him.

'They're saying you was dismissed without stain on your character last night,' Jim said.

He nodded.

'I'm glad, Mr Hugh,' Jim said. 'And I'll not deny it.'

'But I told the truth, Jim.'

'That's the boy. Ride hard, shoot straight, and tell the truth — if you have to. Whole duty of the cavalry.'

Mr Bernard came out of his office, and Jim disappeared.

'You'll not find much wrong with those,' Bernard said. 'I checked them all myself last night. I was here till nearly one o'clock.' He shook his head. 'It's a bad business.'

'What did really happen, Mr Bernard? Has anyone any idea?'

Bernard paused for half a moment before he answered. 'I don't like to think Tom Oliver would have been smoking,' he said.

Twice during the morning he slipped over to the gum store. There was always a chance he might learn something new. But he never did. It was just the same old things ... what Wally had said ... the first aid box ... the blankets ... the factory inspector ... negligence. They said it was an explosion, not a fire, and argued about that. Nobody knew, really. They could only talk with a kind of disillusioned resentment that seemed like frustration. Yet it was strangely exciting to listen.

For no reason, and feeling a little degraded that he should be so curious when it was none of his business, he slipped out after lunch and made his way up to the inquest.

He reached the coroner's court just as they were going in — one group round May Oliver, tiptoeing to the benches indicated by the policeman; another smaller group with his uncle, their boredom veiled in conventional respect, going in and out without ceremony.

Hugh explained to the usher that he did not want to be seen, and was shown to a tiny false gallery below the clock. There was barely room to sit; he had to rest his back against the clock case.

May Oliver identified Tom posthumously as Thomas Algernon Oliver, and the coroner grimaced sympathy, as she sat down again and dabbed her eyes.

Wally — unrecognizable in pinch-waisted suit and winkle-picker shoes — bandaged and pale, gave his evidence, wrestling with the roundabout polysyllabic phrases he felt solemnity demanded. Translated, it was not quite what he had said before.

'Then, your Lord, I couldn't discover no wet blankets, for to put him out, where he was ignited, you see, sir.'

The coroner looked up. 'Are you suggesting, Mr Manson, that there were no blankets? That there should have been blankets for just such an emergency, and there were none?'

Wally's voice rose. 'I ain't suggestin' no suggestings, sir. I couldn't find them blankets, was what I said. With Tom — Mr Oliver — he was screamin', 'e was in agony, you see your Worship — screamin' in agony, I couldn't find no blankets ...'

The coroner made a note.

May Oliver stirred, her feet noisy on the wooden floor.

Tom's father said, 'No,' in a sharp whisper.

'Let be, Pa. I on'y want to tell him that we know Wally did what he could.'

Old Oliver whispered. 'No, girl. 'Tain't convenient.'

Hugh could hear it all quite plainly: their words, the coroner's pen scratching, the little hiss of breath as the coroner leaned forward towards a jerked head on Best & Maunt's side of the court, and said: 'Yes, Mr Panmure?'

'Only to confirm that the witness imputes no blame to my clients for the non-provision of blankets under the Factory Act of 1927, said blankets being, in fact provided.'

The coroner glanced at Wally. 'The point is clear?'

'That's right,' Wally said.

Surely Wally had not understood.



Hugh, looking down like the recording angel, watched Alexander dig his thumb-nail into the yellow varnish of the seat beside him. He is thinking how to get the business from the firm who paint coroners' courts. Then he will be able to supply everything — varnishes, corpses, witnesses, a discount for quantity, and a commission on sales. Hugh wondered if the firm made a coffin varnish.

... 'The first aid box ... in your statement you say it was locked?' The pen scratched.

Wally, more confident now: 'It wouldn't a' bin much good if it was open before me — on account of me hands which was burned — and me not knowing first aid.'

'Was it locked?'

'I couldn't open it was what I said.'

Hugh could feel the clock's thin tick against his back, like a rheumatic heart.

His uncle nodded. Shabby vulture. They were going to get away with it.

Mr Panmure, the solicitor, was on his feet.

'May I put a question, sir?'

The coroner frowned.

'In the absence of H.M. Inspector of Factories,' said the coroner, 'I must adjourn the inquiry after formal evidence of identity and the nature of the accident. I propose so to do.'

'My client,' said Mr Panmure, 'wishes to ask questions about combustibles, that may cast some light on the causes of the tragic accident.'

'Those questions will be of greater point if they are asked in the presence of the duly authorized Home Office inspector. The inquest stands adjourned until next Monday.'

When Hugh slipped downstairs, everyone had gone, except Wally. Hugh turned away into the glossy gloom of a passage. He did not want to speak to Wally. But Wally saw him, and came after him.

'Was you in there, mate?' he asked. 'Didn't see you. Where was you?'

Hugh said he had not wanted Alexander to see him.

'E's not such a bad old josser. 'E's a bit uncouf, but 'e means kindly. When I'm through with this little lot,' he held up hands like blind white paws, 'I'm going to get me job back. And 'e's give me a 'undred quid from the firm — on account of it was a brave ac' he said, to try and put Tom out.'

Hugh said evilly: 'That was why you changed your mind about the blankets?'

The skin of Wally's face below the bandage thickened with blood. His bandaged white paws moved like a bear's. Then he relaxed.

'You hadn't oughter said that, mate,' he said sadly.

Hugh said, 'No, I ought not to have said that. I'm sorry. Only you said there weren't any blankets.'

'There always are,' Wally said. 'That night — I don't rightly know if there was or there wasn't — but if there wasn't, what's sensible in getting some pore bastard into trouble for forgittin' ...'

Hugh said, 'I see. I'm sorry, Wally.'

Wally said, embarrassed: 'That's all right, mate. You didn't mean it.'

But he had meant it.

He said, 'And that's the whole filthy story, Fennel. But they're trying to hush it up.'

The firelight gleamed on Fennel's high, slanting cheekbones, her hair, her forehead, and slid down the line of her chin; but her eyes and mouth were in shadow. It was as though she were watching him through a grille. He was far away, in the shadows on the other side of the room.

'I can't see you,' he said.

She turned deliberately to the firelight, and the glow caught her eyes, and gleamed on tears. There had been no shocked flinching movements of her eyes, no murmurs of 'How terrible,' no staying apart in a comfortable outside world. She had let him batter her with each image, without guarding herself, so that each word struck. She understood, and she was crying.

'Fennel, there must be something to do. Must be. Must. You see ... he was in my department. I am responsible. It's my responsibility ... but I don't know what to do.'

She dropped her head on her arms on the settee.

'What was he like — Tom?' she asked.

For a moment there was a picture in his mind. Tom Oliver eating his lunch in a corner of the gum house. He ate slowly, his jaws moving as if he was thinking. His eyes, 'put in with a sooty finger', deep-set in a flat, smooth, adenoidal face, like an Aztec face ... his eyes following the precise movement of his big hands as he speared a piece of cheese and put it on a chunk of bread ...

Then it had gone.

'I can't even remember properly,' he said. 'That's awful. Awful — it's disloyal.'

She was twisting her fingers through the cord that edged the settee, fingers and golden cord involved in a slow cat's cradle. She said, 'Disloyal? What a funny word.' She untangled the cord from her fingers, and added severely, 'You hardly knew him.'

'At least I could have minded enough to remember that.'

'Oh dear.'

She patted the settee for him to come and sit there, but he stayed by the window, turning towards it to stay away. The curtains were not drawn, but it was dark outside, and the street lamps were alight. A car was parked by the nearest lamp. RGT 666.

He said, 'When it was my fault — over the overalls — I knew what to do. Nothing's changed, only I don't know, any more.'

She said, 'Maybe there just isn't anything to be done.'

'Forgetting what he looked like. The easy way out.'

'But it's only what everybody does. Everybody forgets. It's best.'

He pressed his nose against the glass. It was queer to feel the nostrils spread against the skin of his face.

'I've got to mind. Or I'll be like them. Saying "Give her a few hundred." Conscience money.'

'I thought old — Best, is it? — sounded nice. As if he was thinking

of people — Mrs Oliver, her children too, and Tom. As if he really cared.'

'They've got round Wally.'

'Poor Wally.'

'I've got to mind. Got to. Got to.'

He turned back to face her, to convince her.

'Don't you see? They've got to be stopped ever doing it again.'

It was the sensible, practical thing to say; yet he had a feeling that he had made it up. As if it were a pompous curtain line in a play.

When he had given out the morning's work in the department, he went up the iron staircase to the little lab. There were still a number of flashpoints to be done, and rumour round the factory had it that the factory inspector would be coming that afternoon.

He filled a retort with white spirit. Then he realized there was something very simple he could do. He put the bunsen under the retort, and when the spirit was bubbling nicely and the gases were distilling greasily, knowing perfectly well that it was a recklessly dangerous and stupid thing to do, he lit a cigarette and quite slowly introduced it into the chamber. As he did it he could imagine the explosion — the flying glass splinters — the fire — and himself alight from head to foot like Tom Oliver, unable to put out the flames; but in an odd sort of way, that wasn't his concern at all. It was just a thing to be done.

But nothing happened.

Arm up to protect his eyes, he waited.

Still nothing.

Dropping his arm, he watched. The cigarette paper grew dirty where the vapour condensed on it, the glowing end blackened and extinguished.

He tried several times, with different mixtures of air, different temperatures.

The cigarette went out every time.

Now he knew.



In the afternoon Uncle Alexander came up to the lab to collect the flashpoint figures. Hugh was disappointed; he had hoped to meet the factory inspector.

He gave him the tabulated figures, and for good measure a graph of the flashpoints plotted against gas density and temperature; but first he signed his name on each page.

Alexander frowned. 'There's no earthly need for that. They're for my personal use.' Riffing the pages he added irritably, 'They're very high, these figures.' He peered at the apparatus to see if it was faulty.

'I don't think so.'

Hugh told him about failing to explode the gases with a cigarette end.

'That's extremely dangerous. You might have blown yourself sky-high too.'

'It proves that smoking was not the cause of the fire.'

Uncle Alexander used the meaningless smile one uses to avoid a bore. 'You've got to light a cigarette.'

'No one's going to strike a match at the moment they're thinning varnish. Least of all Tom.'

Uncle Alexander frowned again.

'You don't want to get too familiar with the men under you. It doesn't pay.'

He turned to go.

'Look,' said Hugh.

He picked up a dead match end; lit it in the bunsen; held it while the flame caught; then dropped it into the open retort bubbling on its stand.

It was a fair gamble.

Alexander went white and ducked down under the bench.

Hugh remained impassive — that much he owed himself.

The match hissed. Went out.

Alexander was too angry and frightened to say much. What he did say was: 'You might have killed us both. You aren't fit to be in charge here.'

'But I didn't,' Hugh said.

'It proves nothing.'

Hugh went to the top of the stairs and watched Alexander go down. When he reached the bottom, Alexander put the papers in his pocket, and shook his head.

Later he told himself he ought to go over to the gum stores and ask Jim about Mrs Oliver. Surely it was his duty; Jim would expect it. Yet he was reluctant to go.

When at last he went down the iron steps and into the empty yard he was tense, almost feverishly wary. Jim was there, and two vanmen, a couple of varnish-runners, Brindells, who seemed to be some kind of relation of Tom Oliver's, a man from the Enamel Hugh did not know, and Wally, a little sheepish at being at the factory when he was on sick leave.

They were talking about Tom and May. But everything was different; behind his back everything had changed, and he felt like a stranger. They were relaxed. All the resentful talk had died. Now the mood was of practical worldly wisdom.

Brindells was saying, 'E's all right, the Guv'nor. 'E was up at May's yesterday. "Don't you want for anything," 'e said. Gave 'er two 'undred nicker, 'e did. An exgrasser payment, 'e said.'

'It don't seem much ... two ton for a man's life,' a vanman said.

'But it was exgrasser. Bunce. 'E gave it personal. Apart from anything may be due 'er, like compensation,' Brindells explained obstinately. 'Out of 'is own pocket, mate.'

Wally said, 'She could get a nice little shop for that. With 'er compensation that's six 'undred pound.'

'It don't seem right. Bog Kelly, up at the Lino ... what lost 'is leg in the guillotine there — 'e got a thousand nicker just for 'is disability.'

There was a man who had been killed at the docks. His widow got nigh on three thousand pounds.

'But they proved negligence, mate. You got to prove negligence, see?' Brindells explained May was entitled to four hundred pounds



under the Workmen's Compensation Act. It was her right. If she brought a case against the firm in common law, for negligence, she forfeited that right. If she won, she might get two or three thousand pounds. If she lost, she would get nothing at all.

'She's better off with her four hundred quid.'

'May's young yet. There's more'n a few woulden' mind marrying a widow with three children if she 'ad six 'undred quid in 'er stocking with 'er legs.'

Their laughter came across the sunlight to Hugh in the doorway, as a kind of desecration.

'Fairy story,' said Hugh. 'Mrs Oliver gets a new husband and six hundred pounds, and Best & Maunt live happily ever after.'

Nobody spoke. There was a feeling of eyes averted, of a shoulder shrugging.

Brindells stirred, and it was as if the group had broken up, had lost its cohesion at the exact moment he stirred. He peered round the door at the yard clock.

'It's nigh arf past,' he said.

Hugh stood away from the doorposts as if to let him pass.

'Two days ago,' said Hugh, 'you were going to pull the place down because of all the things that were wrong.' Brindells moved past him; smiled his wan green smile. 'Now everything in the garden's lovely. Why? What's happened to make it all so different?'

One of the varnish-runners, a man called Bert, said, not unkindly, as he got up to go:

'You should know, mate.'

'What do you mean?'

'It's what you bin doing, ain't it? Up in your little 'ole in the wall? Proving it was all started by a fag end?'

Hugh stammered, 'No. No.'

Bert said, 'Nobody 'olds it against you, mate. You'se got to do what you're told same as anybody else.'

Hugh laughed, a dry, nervous bark that came from his stomach. 'That's bloody funny, if you think about it.'

'What's so funny, mate?'

'If I've proved anything I've proved it couldn't have been a cigarette.'

Wally said, 'Don't see 'ow you could a done that.'

But they were still. They were listening. He caught Jim's warning, frozen, troop-serjeant's eye, and looked away.

'By throwing lighted cigarettes into the gases and seeing what happens. I wasted a whole packet.'

He said it very quickly as if to get finished with it.

'They go out.'

Bert said, 'You got your nerve, mate.'

Brindells said, 'E's true blue all through. Ain't you, Hughie boy?'

'I try to be.'

One by one they went out. Jim began to pile empty copal bags.

'I shouldn't have told them, Jim.'

'And me trying to catch your eye.'

'But Jim ... they're going back on all they said — the blankets — the first aid — the fire extinguisher that was empty ...'

'You don't want to pay too much attention to what was said those first days, Mr Hugh. There was a great deal more said than the truth.'

Suddenly the world had shrunk to unmanageably tiny proportions. 'I know,' he said.

Jim said, 'They're good lads, Mr Hugh. They're thinking of May.'

It sounded like a rebuke.

It was all over the factory by nightfall that he had risked his life proving Tom had not been responsible for his own death.

It was Saturday, the day of the funeral, when Samuels came into the Cellulose.

'I've just left your relative.'

Samuels opened a tin of green lacquer, sniffed it, prodded at the contents with his finger. A drop fell from the lid on to the bench.

'With him,' said Samuels, 'you qualify as the world's most unpopular man. If there was a tank of oil boiling, I wouldn't give much for your chances.'

'Good.' A pause. 'I'll pull him in with me.'

Samuels wiped his finger on Hugh's lab coat.

'Hadn't you better tell Daddy?'

'I threw a cigarette into boiling white spirit and it didn't explode.'

'Go on.' Samuels's green-stained finger stroked the button of dried green lacquer on the bench. In the centre it was mottled with darker, bluer green. Samuels picked at it while Hugh told him. He broke a nail.

'Uncle wants to prove the explosion was because Tom was smoking.'

'Wasn't he?'

Hugh prised the button off. His thumb-nail did not break. He flipped it towards Samuels, like a tiddly-wink.

'I've proved it couldn't be that.'

'But if I had to make some varnish,' said Samuels, 'I'd still do it without a cigarette in my mouth, thank you. I'm not lucky.'

He opened a tin of solvent, and cleaned his fingers.

'Mind a word of advice, young Nepos?'

'No.' His voice sounded sulky, but Samuels looked at him diffidently. 'Of course not. Why should I?'

'Well then. You've made your slightly ambiguous point. Now lay off.'

'Do nothing?'

'What else? Is there something to do? To begin with, it's none of your business. And you're on tricky ground — your uncle's calling you an agitator.'

'Is he, now? That's the last thing I am.'

'Then what did you go blatting to everyone for? You must have known it was dynamite.' Samuels broke the tiddly-wink of lacquer in two. 'Or was that the idea?'

'No, no. It wasn't. You know I wouldn't do a thing like that.'

'Of course not. But, Nepos ... you did.'

'It just slipped out — they were so ... oh, I don't know.'

Samuels's face mimed a joke. 'Perhaps your Freudian slip was showing.'

He sighed.

'Were you smoking those cigarettes you hurled so recklessly into the boiling white spirit?'

'How do you mean?'

'There's a big difference in temperature between a cigarette drawing between the lips and one smouldering in the hand. Two hundred degrees? Maybe more.'

Hugh said quickly, reasonably, 'If I can work up enough brave I'll check that some time.'

But there was no need to check.

Samuels was right.

Outside he could hear the increasing sound of footsteps on cobbles, and iron stairs, as the men began to hurry down to the main gate. In a minute the hooter would go.

Poke knocked, and came in with Jack Smith. Hugh unlocked the flat-topped schoolmasterish desk, took out Poke's Woodbines and matches, Jack Smith's shag and papers; his lighter.

At the back of the desk, forgotten until this moment, lay a packet of shag — it rustled like dry leaves when it was moved; a box of matches; cigarette papers.

They had belonged to Tom Oliver.

For some reason one moved a file to hide them.

The men went away. One shut the desk slowly, and locked it.

Samuels cocked an eye. 'What's all that in aid of?'

'Factory Act. All combustibles must be locked up. Working with cellulose nitrate. Sometimes I come over all boy-detective, and have a search. Penalty for cigarettes hidden in the trousers pockets ... instant dismissal ... or sooner.'

One took off one's lab coat, put on one's jacket. Locked the door as one went out. Checked that the switches were off. On the way through the door of the department, one said:

'That's why I was so sure about the smoking.'

Pause.

'Oliver never had anything to lock up.'

Samuels halted in the doorway.

'Are you trying to make out now he didn't smoke?'

'No. He was a chain smoker. That was why.'

It was as exciting as a game.

'He just never brought cigarettes to work. He said he was afraid to. Before he came to us as charge hand he was in the varnish house. They don't lock up matches there. If you smoked as much as he did, it was too easy to light one without thinking, he said. So he didn't bring any to work.'

Samuels said, 'That puts quite a different complexion on it. Quite a different complexion.'

Out in the yard he added, 'There'd been a fire or something when he first came to the factory. That had scared him, I think.'

Two men from the Paint jostled them, running past.

'Have you told your relative this?'

He shook his head. 'Should I?'

'You really are an improbable man, Nepos.' Samuels shook his head. 'Why on earth not?'

'You said yourself that it was none of my business. If you think I should, Dr Samuels ...'

After all, it was not really a lie. Tom had left his tobacco locked up. He could not have been smoking.

... Unless he had bought some more ...

He went to the funeral. As a guest; not like the *guv'nor*, who, so it seemed, went as of right, following the cortège in his primrose Rolls Royce.

After the ceremony, old Best beckoned as his Rolls moved slowly past the empty hearse.

'Jump in,' he said. 'I'll give you a lift back to town.'

Faced with Best's evaluating stare, Hugh hesitated. He did not know how to say he would rather go back with the others.

'Get in, man,' said Best. He was telling Hugh to be sensible, not to side with a lot of ignorant workmen, not to get involved. Hooves scrunched on the gravel; a gleam of sunlight reflected from the glass of the hearse, moved across Best's eyes.

'No sir. I'm going back to the house,' Hugh said.

The car shouldered him out of the way. He went back to the others.

The Olivers' house was crowded when they got there; crowded with neighbours and friends who had come in to show respect. Mrs Oliver was hurried upstairs by the women, a queen bee hustled by her workers. She must be alone to mourn.

'Better for her if she could cry.'

The older men, in Kingsman scarves, black for mourning, were mustered in the front parlour, silent, blank, as if they feared that soon it would be their turn. As an honour, Hugh was put in with them. Some of them were a little drunk already. He was ashamed of being there, and was thinking how to get away, when Jim Boylan came over.

Jim seemed embarrassed.

'The lads have been on at me, Mr Hugh,' he said, 'to ask ye's whether you'd see May's lawyer about that business you were telling them in the gum stores that day.'

He swung round to face Jim, but he could not speak.

Jim misunderstood his silence. 'Maybe it would be fairer to subpoeny you, you being in an invidjus position.'

Hugh shook his head. 'I don't go back on my word, Jim.'

'Was never a Jegon did ... The lawyer man is here. You could be private with him now, if you liked. There's the back room.'

The lawyer was sallow, as if he spent too much time in airless police courts. He wore a celluloid collar. You spat on a handkerchief and rubbed it over the celluloid and the dirt came off.

Hugh told the little man about the flashpoints, the cigarettes, the match; and deflated his own story by telling how Samuels had spotted the flaw in his reasoning.

Then — and he would never know why; it was such a damned silly thing to do — he told him the tale he had told Samuels; the tale about Tom never bringing cigarettes to the factory. In the man's own house. With his wife and friends to give him the lie.



Only, of course, they would not. His word was as good as the next man's, and surely if he was willing to perjure himself it meant that his feelings must be true.

The lawyer — he was only a lawyer's clerk — sucked his teeth.

'Interesting,' he said. 'Most interesting.' Then he said, 'It could be very telling. Should Mrs Oliver bring a case against the firm ...'

He said he was most grateful to Hugh for coming forward like this, and added something about showing great moral courage ... in his situation.

On Monday morning he went to see his uncle.

Alexander Maunt was in what Hugh supposed he would himself describe as 'a high good humour'. When he spoke, his phrasing was noticeably jocular, and his voice a good semitone higher than usual.

'Well, young man, what can we do for you?'

'There's something I want to tell you, Uncle.'

Alexander interrupted. 'Let me clear the decks first, eh? Then I'll give you my undivided attention.'

He lifted the telephone, asked for Mr Panmure. While he was waiting, telephone at ear, he stared at Hugh, eyes sharply focused on Hugh's, as if to reflect the keen focus of his mind on the problem of what to say to the lawyer. But one had only to move one's head by just the thickness of the film of moisture that covered Alexander's eyes, for them to change focus to follow. He was not really thinking at all, it was just an act. His gestures were platitudes too.

'Hullo, Panmure. Yes, quite lovely. Look, I've got the draft of the factory inspector's report. As he'll be putting it in at the inquiry. Yes. Very satisfactory, as a matter of fact.'

The eyes left Hugh's for a moment, looking for the report among the papers on the desk. You had to stay absolutely still; so that Alexander would not see you.

'... He notes that all recommendations made on his last visit six weeks ago have been carried out ... da, da, da ... No fault to find with the safety arrangements ... Yes, I'll send it over for you to

read. There are seventeen pages ... He goes on, he has examined the site of the accident. Electrical circuits all adequately fused and insulated ... exhaust fans ... Ah, here we are ... "Satisfied there was no mechanical or electrical failure that might have led to the fatality" ... Here we are ... "In default of direct evidence the actual sequence of events must always remain problematical. But in my submission the evidence can only be completely explained on the assumption that in direct contravention of the Factory Act, the unfortunate man struck a match to light a cigarette" ... '

It was very strange how the dry phrases carried the truth ... Everyone else had known all along, of course ... so had he really ... only ... how can anyone know? No one has the right to be so sure ... not about someone else. No one has the right ... no one. He must think what to do ... but he was still listening ... so as not to think. He had to listen ...

'Yes. A clean bill. Now we can go ahead. Will you send off that letter we discussed, to the widow's solicitors? Yes, two thousand five hundred pounds in full and final settlement—if she will sign an instrument forgoing any claim against the firm for negligence, etc.'

What he had to say was out of date now; quite irrelevant.

'Yes ... I think we're being generous. But we've always tried not to lose sight of the individual. We're still a family firm, Panmure.'

Replacing the receiver, Uncle Alex smiled.

'Now, old chap.'

'Before what I've got to say, Uncle, it's only fair to give you my notice.' Somehow he was not able to think fast enough to catch up with the changing situation.

'I don't think we'll bother about that. Just say what you have to say, eh?'

'Dr Samuels said it might be important. It's about Oliver.'

'Yes?' Alexander scratched the back of one hand with one finger of the other.

'Every morning I lock up all the men's cigarettes, matches and tobacco. Oliver never gave me any. During the last six weeks, I've

had three snap searches. I've never found even an empty cigarette packet on him. Dr Samuels said I ought to tell you. It seems to rule smoking out of court.'

Alexander frowned. 'I see.'

For a moment his eyes wavered towards the telephone; wondering whether to ring Panmure. Then they came back to bore into Hugh's. It was a trick, of course, a salesman's trick. They taught them to do it. You gaze at the bridge of the nose, and it gives an effect of clairvoyant understanding, and unflinching probity.

'I don't think we need worry about that. Not now,' he said.

'But if Mrs Oliver's lawyers don't accept your offer, I must give evidence for them.'

'She will be very ill-advised if she doesn't. With the sums paid *ex gratia*, her statutory compensation, and the money we have offered, she will get something like three thousand pounds. Rather more than a court would award if she brought a case. She'd lose, of course ... and get nothing for her pains.'

The loose skin of Uncle Alexander's neck looked like a bird's skin plucked of feathers.

'I think perhaps my notice had better stand just the same, Uncle.'

'Why?'

There did not seem to be a reason. 'I must be free to act as I think right,' he said. It sounded very pretentious.

Alexander pressed a thought into the top of his desk with his thumb.

'I suppose the truth is, you have seen Mrs Oliver's lawyers with this tale?'

'Yes. Yes. As a matter of fact.'

The eyes dropped from his.

'Wasn't that rather disloyal? When you had not told us?'

'Perhaps.' It was all one could think to say.

'We won't go into that. So you want to leave us. Why?'

Hugh dug his hands deep into his pockets, stared out of the window in silence, swung round suddenly to speak. He knew he was only imitating his father. It was a mime of blunt and forceful

honesty, as if a family dialect of gesture would be powerful enough to convince them both.

'I think you know, Uncle.' His voice was throaty — middle-aged. 'Yes, you know ... A man's killed. He leaves a widow and children, and you can call it disloyal to tell her advisers what you know about the cause of his death ... That's a reason, isn't it?'

He said a lot of other things; all the things the men had said the first day after the fire. He sounded very angry, and the words erupted with a scalding contempt. But at the back of his mind there was only cold panic, because what he was saying was beside the point — he did not believe it, and he should be saying something quite different and he did not know what. He ended, 'Now, you're buying her off.'

Alexander went the colour of tinned salmon. 'That's just hysteria.' 'Probably.'

Uncle Alex said, 'I've been very patient with you, I think. I've given you credit for good faith, these last few days ...'

Through the window, Hugh could look down on the yard. It was a grey day, and it was interesting how the greyness of the day seemed to muffle the clatter of the trolley wheels as the men wheeled their loads up the ramp. They sounded so far away. Perhaps it was some effect of humidity? From the wall above the Dispatch a jet of steam spurted; someone shut it off.

Alexander stopped speaking. He looked as if he expected some answer.

'I'll leave on Friday, then, Uncle,' Hugh said, as if it followed naturally from everything Alexander had been saying.

Alexander looked puzzled. He shrugged his shoulders.

All through the morning, one worked quite obsessively. It was a camouflage. Working, one could pass unnoticed by oneself, anonymous. One must not let oneself think about what one had done. There must be a total secrecy, so that no one could pick up one's thoughts — not even oneself.

When Dr Samuels came in on his usual Monday visit, and said he

had heard a rumour that one was leaving, one told him one was leaving for personal reasons.

'Purely personal reasons, Dr Samuels. Private reasons. Really.'

Samuels did not seem very convinced. He ran a finger down a crack in the desk, mapping the edges with his nail, and said, 'I see,' and remarked, too soon, too gently, how generous the firm were being to Mrs Oliver. One answered 'Yes. They are,' so enthusiastically; yet Samuels persevered.

'Got a job, young Nepos?'

One shook one's head — gaily, to head off the questions, more than to give information.

'You really are a most improbable chap, aren't you?'

'Yes. Of course.'

Samuels only put a friendly hand on one's arm, which was extremely embarrassing. 'Look, old Nepos, do you need a job?'

'I suppose so.'

'I don't suppose it's any good. But it might keep the wolf from the door while you're looking round. My girl's brother's got a riding school Barnes Common way. If you like, I'll ring him up. He's been looking for an instructor for ages now.'

Samuels thought one should go now, today, and see about it.

He offered to mind the lab. He was a very nice chap, really.

5 IN the office by the covered riding school, to the accompaniment of a single horse's hooves thudding round the tan, Hugh saw Captain Holyoake, a small, neatly horsy man with a neat bibulous face and a soft, neatly sociable voice.

Holyoake asked him who had won the National in 1912, seemed pleased that he knew; asked if he had done any steeplechasing, and did not listen when he told him; asked how much he wanted a



week, and said, before Hugh could answer, that he could not pay more than three pounds ten.

'Take it or leave it,' Holyoake said.

Hugh said, 'Don't you want to see how I ride?'

Holyoake smiled mirthlessly. 'It's a god-awful rut this. If you're fool enough to want to work in a riding school, you'll ride well enough.' He smiled. 'It's Easter this week-end, isn't it? Nine o'clock Tuesday, then. Ratting order and a hard hat.'

Then he thought of something. He seemed pleased at being so businesslike.

'I suppose I ought to take up references.'

'I thought Dr Samuels told you ...'

Holyoake looked as if he thought Hugh had stolen something from his last employer.

'Wouldn't your firm give you a reference?'

'I don't think so, sir.'

'Oh.'

'I left over a matter of principle.'

Holyoake looked at the appointment book on his desk.

'I suppose it's all right,' he said at last. 'But we don't have principles here. We just do a day's damned hard work.'

As a kind of afterthought, Holyoake began to talk about steeple-chasing. If Hugh was his paid servant he could no longer ride in races as an amateur. He quoted the National Hunt Club's rule. What if he did not pay Hugh a salary? What if he gave him a share of the profits?

Just to have a job was for some reason important; too important to worry whether he was being had for a sucker. He agreed without argument to accept a sixth share of the net profits, in lieu of salary. There was just enough money in his savings tin to carry him through the six months that Holyoake suggested for a trial run.

Fennel said, very slowly: 'Hugh, I don't understand. You said all that about negligence — the factory inspector not coming — the



blankets not being there — all that — you said it was only talk. Just the men talking. That is what you said.'

'Isn't it fairly generally accepted there's no smoke without a fire?'

Dimly reflected in the window, he could see her face lifted to look at him.

'Not by you. Not ever by you. That's "common sense". It's one of the things you always hate people saying.'

Her voice was so reasonable, so gentle, that he had to think about what she was saying.

'Hugh, why did you have to pretend it was true?'

He watched the lamplighter cycle along the gutter, take one foot off the pedal and slide it along the kerbstone, prod at the trigger of a street lamp with his pole, and, recovering in one involved lurch of pole and bike, ride on. The ring of light from the lamp, pale against the misty dusk, came on with a suddenness that was almost audible.

He was surprised to hear his own voice saying wearily, 'I don't know. I don't know ...'

... He had come straight to her after seeing Holyoake. She had not been expecting him, and when she opened the door and saw him she was surprised. But he had to blurt it all out right away.

'I've done it, Fennel. I've left the place. I finally found the guts to tell them what I think about the way they treat their workpeople, and walked out.'

She stood in the doorway.

'I'm ironing,' she said. 'There's an awful mess.'

He thought her tone sounded defensive. He wondered why. And suddenly it only seemed shabby and down-at-heel — indigent — to need to come rushing for her approval of a tale so urgent that it had to be blurted out at the door.

'Mrs Oliver's getting properly compensated, though,' he said.

'Just a min while I clear everything away. Then we'll have tea and you can tell me properly.'

But over the tea things he told the story like an automaton; like

a hostile automatic memory without any faculty of selecting the relevant or the dramatic, the true or the false.

When he had finished she said uncertainly, 'Hugh ... you might have been blinded.'

He would rather she had been angry.

He got up and went to the window, and leaned against the sash-box, staring out at the trees.

'I didn't think about it at all,' he said. 'It didn't arise. Nothing ever costs me as much as that.'

She said, 'That was why — partly why, anyway — you took that terrible risk telling that fib about Tom? ... It could have meant prison.'

Fleetingly, it had seemed true. He nodded; erased the nod quickly by a lot of tiny confused movements of his head.

'Who could prove it?' he said. 'Pretty safe odds, really. I'm not one to risk my skin — or gaol.'

'I think it must have been brave, though. Really brave.'

'No.' He couldn't stomach that. 'No. Just perjury. Put a spoke in their wheel. Stop 'em getting above themselves.' He turned towards her, waving his hand airily.

She was sitting in her favourite place, on the rug by the fire, her arms on the settee, her chin propped on her hands. Her face clouded at his tone. She looked at him for a bit, and then, as if she was making herself comfortable for a long wait, she sat back on her heels, and smoothed her skirt around her on the carpet — looking down as she smoothed it, not looking at him.

'There's one thing I don't understand,' she said. 'Why did you have to resign over things you knew were not true?'

If she had been angry — if he had had to defend — he would have had a convincing answer. But she had said it all so gently, as if she had been a voice in his own mind.

'Why did you have to pretend? ... '

And at that exact moment he had realized there was no answer that he could think of at all ...

... 'I don't know. I don't know.'

She said, 'I — I was so proud. Thinking of you risking all that because you wanted to take responsibility for Tom and his wife. Because you cared.'

'I told you I couldn't even remember what he looked like.'

'But when you knew your Uncle Alexander was helping Mrs Oliver ... He was on your side. To say he was doing nothing — to say all those things you knew weren't true — and walk out all hoity-toity — it seems so mean. It makes everything seem so mean. Even the good things before.'

He said, 'Maybe that's what they are. Maybe I am.'

'If you wanted to leave, surely all you had to do was tell him ... It makes it seem as if you despised them all.'

Then she said slowly, 'You do, though, don't you? You despise everybody, really. It's safest.'

He supposed it was true; but it seemed unbearable that she could have brought herself to say it.

He looked quickly away from the window and grinned at her, gay and insolent. 'Of course. Get it in first before they get round to despising me. The quickness of the hand deceives the eye.'

She breathed in sharply, and left something unsaid.

He supposed he had lost her now. It was probably for the best.

She was staring into the fire, focusing her eyes against its near, warm dazzle. Suddenly she said, 'What are you going to tell your father?'

He breathed on the glass of the window and watched the mist diminish slowly, iridescently, from the edges inward.

In for a penny, in for a pound.

'I expect I shall think of a lie,' he said. 'I usually do.'

That finally finishes everything, he thought. That is the last straw

She said, quite casually, as if it were the most ordinary thing to say, 'Of course, if it had all been true — really true — the way you wanted it to be — with your uncle still trying to prove it was Tom's fault, and all the things you said — the way you pretended it was — your father couldn't have let you stay another minute at the factory.'

He said, 'You can't think much of me, to say that.'

'Does that matter?'

Then suddenly he could not bear it. Feeling curiously far away from what he was doing, like a sleepwalker, he went slowly round the settee, dropping down to half kneel, half sit, beside her on the floor.

'Oh Fennel,' he said. He put his arms around her and dropped his head on her shoulder. Her hand came up to stroke the back of his neck, to pat his shoulders. It was as if absent-mindedly she were comforting a baby. It was as if she were putting him in his place.

He took her head in both hands and forced her to face him. He knew he was hurting her, but that did not matter; all that mattered was that she should not leave him alone, outside, in childhood.

She stayed quite relaxed, without reaction, looking at him. He would have done anything to take that look of pity off her face.

He stood up, lifting her bodily from the floor. He had a wild idea of flinging her down again, of really hurting her.

Then — the look had gone, and he had won.

He kissed her hard on the mouth. He swung her round in a wild swirl of triumph that sent her skirt flying out like a skater's, and was going to drop her gently on the settee, when — infinitesimally, so that he sensed rather than saw it — her eyes flickered towards the divan in the corner. Dry-mouthed, he carried her over to it.

She said, matter-of-factly, 'Just a minute,' and leaning down from his arms, pulled off the coverlet. Then she was helping him with her buttons. When she reached up to the switch of the light, her eyes, aslant and secret, glinted in the light of the fire.

Afterwards, drifting back into a separateness that was no longer loneliness — remembering her voice, harsh and bitter, and urgent, whispering incoherent commands and endearments, and then drowning in a small lonely sigh like a death — he looked down at her face on his shoulder, and saw her eyes. She was looking at him with an unwavering steady gaze: not appraising, not studying, yet as if she was seeing him completely for the first time. He leant over

her, putting little gentle kisses on the curve of her breast, and she arched her body firm against his mouth.

In a very practical, thoughtful voice she said, 'How did we get here?' She ran her finger across his ribs. 'You're a skinnygalee.' She smiled to herself. 'I was just deciding never to see you again.'

'I know.'

She took his hand; and leaning over swiftly she kissed the fingers, one by one, closing the fingers up as she kissed them.

'Clever Hugh,' she said. 'I wish we had a little black slave-boy. Just a little one, very young and black, or perhaps you'd prefer a eunuch — to be on the safe side.'

'Isn't one enough?'

'You're not a eunuch. But if we had one we could send him into the kitchen. There's a fiasco of Barolo there.'

He sat up, but she kissed him impersonally on the corner where eye and cheek meet, pushed him back, and slid away in one long wide sprawling stride across the bed.

In a moment she was back, with wine and glasses on a tray held high like an offering. Around her head she had wound a napkin, a bright folk-weave dinner napkin, like a slave-woman's bandanna; her body gleamed ivory and black as it pressed forward into the firelight.

'The wine m'sieu ordered.'

She poured the Barolo, the glasses stood together on the table. The wine reflected washed-out red new moons among the shadows on the walls.

She knelt by the bed. Gently, slowly, she bent down, putting her mouth to the hard muscle just below the cage of his ribs; and without her eyes' reassurance, seeing only her hair, the chequered turban, and the shadowed hollows of her back, he was alone, and uncertain, and shy.

When she sat up, they looked at the red weal, like a birthmark.

'That'll be a bruise tomorrow. That's to show you're mine. Mine. Hands off. Fennel — her mark.' Then, with sudden bleakness: 'Not that you'll remember, if you don't happen to feel like it.'



He said, afraid again: 'No, Fennel, don't say that.'

'There's nothing left to stop you now,' she said bitterly. 'You will ...'

In the most ordinary voice in the world, she went on. 'You see ... you're afraid of love. But you'll have to go on looking for it. Go on looking ... and hiding ... and looking.'

She was kneeling, sitting back on her heels, holding his hand. The attitude of a small girl playing with a kitten, so relaxed she might have been joking.

She said, 'There's not going to be very much in it for me, is there?'

Her voice was matter-of-fact; but she was looking at him almost as if she hated him.

'No. No. No.'

He did not know what, in that small animal murmur, he was denying, only that he must deny. He looked away. His hand that held the wine glass was trembling.

She was saying, 'I know — you see. I know before I start ... and I can't help it, and I'll just have to grin and bear it. But you'll never get another girl who will love you quite so totally.'

Very slowly so that the wine would not spill, but quickly because the trembling was getting worse, he put the glass on the bedside table.

'Fennel. I do love you. I always shall.'

It sounded so frozen. So bleak.

'I know I always shall.'

It was the only thing he could say.

'I don't believe there's anything to love with,' she said. 'There's a beautiful body; and a beautiful face. Eyes, eyes that never miss the slightest thing. Ears that hear the tiniest breath of sound ... all correct ...'

He had to stop her talking like that.

He wrinkled his nose and made it twitch like a hound's. 'Ranter. You've forgotten the nose.'

She frowned. 'Don't interrupt. But ... you are quite, quite heartless. You notice so much about people that most people never



even begin to see. You're quicker at reading a mood than anyone. Perhaps you scent it like a dog — but you don't understand people any better because of that. You just don't know what they're like, inside. I don't think you can. It's only safe for you to love things and people you can laugh at.'

She sat up on her heels.

'I'll be your joke, darling. I'll be your funny doll.'

She made a mop of her hair, and flopped it from side to side. Then pulling a dismembered face she made a little ballet of being a rag doll with the stuffing coming out, and being shaken by a child in a tantrum.

'Promise you'll always laugh at me,' she said. 'Promise. Promise. Because while you laugh you won't ever need to lie.'

'I promise.'

He pulled her down to him.

'Always,' he said. 'You'll be my custard pie.'

But he noticed that the skin of her shoulder was gleaming wet. There must have been tears in his eyes.

He said, 'You made me laugh until I cried,' and she said, 'Oh darling,' as if she had won a victory.

Then she said, 'Men are frightful cry-babies when they're in love.'

When he awoke she was curled into the crook of his arm, and over her head the glowing dial of her alarm clock showed half past one.

He was thinking about his father and Aunt Hilda — wondering how to explain missing his last train, afraid to move for fear that Fennel would guess his thoughts — when she murmured, 'Awake darling?'

When he did not answer, she said, 'Hugh, your last train! You've missed your train! Darling, what shall we do? What about your father? You'll have to take a cab. I've got some money.'

'Go back to sleep,' he said firmly. 'If the train's gone, I can't catch it, can I?'

'You're so practical,' she said. The fire settled among its ashes.

'I'm not making complaints, darling,' she said. 'It's very nice

sleeping with you. We sleep at the same temperature, and that's very comforting. But you've got to go soon, anyway — before the porter comes on duty. For obvious reasons. Otherwise, he's got such a dirty mind he'll think the worst.'

Walking down to Westminster, he felt very grown-up, very exalted, very much master of his fate.

Scavengers in wide-awake hats were hosing the streets. Arched ropes of water from the hoses foamed in the moonlight, formed cusps, swayed, fell back, grew again elsewhere. Water sucked noisily in the culverts. A wedge of cloud pellets driving across the blackened silver of the sky reflected honey-coloured in the glow of the town.

A scavenger called, 'Good night, sir.'

'Good night to you.'

A cat flowed past, black and tigerish.

'Good night, cat.'

A good night to all the world.

As he walked down Grosvenor Place he swung his fist against the grey curve of wall round the grounds of Buckingham Palace. It hurt, but it seemed that it was an altogether different pain from the pain he would have felt, doing the same thing five hours before.

He was seeing — feeling — everything for the first time. Before, there had always been something that had to be believed in first, even before the facts, that had blinkered his eyes to the facts. Now it was different. He was not afraid of love any more. He walked on through a chill hollowness of streets, ringing with the coming dawn.

He reached Blackheath in time for breakfast and a shave before catching his usual train to the factory. As he made himself tea, his father came down.

'Where did you get to, last night?'

'I got talking and missed the last train, Father, so I spent the night with my friend.'

'We're on the telephone, you know.'

'I'm sorry, Father, but when I realized, it was a bit late.'

'Who was this friend?'

Blandly Hugh said, 'A chap called Davis, Father.'

Aubrey said, 'It's very thoughtless,' and turned away.

He had not lied in any particular, and his father believed him. It was very satisfactory. But he could not tell his father yet about leaving the factory. That required preparation. When he did tell him, he would tell the truth. It was the only thing to do.

He always went to Troy for Easter and the point-to-points; he ought to let Aunt Bess know he was coming this year. In some casual, unembarrassing way he would get her to ask Fennel too.

He rang her up from the telephone box outside the factory. He was just going to explain about Fennel, when he realized he need not. Jean was in town.

'It would be much more economical, dear, to come down with her on Thursday evening in the car.'

If Jean were to ask Fennel, nobody need know more than he told them. He rang her up.

Jean was waiting for him when he reached the restaurant. It was a year since he had seen her, and it was as if she had escaped from him into womanhood. That made him self-conscious, too formal, too polite, like a parody of an old-world conversationalist.

Jean looked up from her soup and said, 'When you behave as if I were the Queen of the Head Hunters, you always want something. What?'

He wondered if she would give him a lift down for Easter.

'And?'

He chuckled. He heard his voice say, beautifully casually: 'I wondered if you'd ask a friend of mine?'

'Why not ask Mummy to invite her?'

He laughed. It was going to work. 'Her?'

'If it had been a man, you'd bring him uninvited.'

He nodded. 'I hadn't thought of that.'

Jean looked down at her plate, and said, as casually as he could have said it himself: 'What's she like?'

'She's called Fennel — her name's Fennel Davies. She's a violinist. She's awfully good, too. For what it's worth, she's a lady.'

'That's something. Geoffrey's first was a tobacconist's assistant.' She almost looked up at him. 'Are you in love with her?'

'Good lord, no!' he said with virtue.

'Then why didn't you ask Mummy?'

'Well ...'

Jean said, with decision, 'Because if Mummy doesn't know, you can say she is a friend of mine and you met her at Troy.'

The worst was over. He nodded.

'What a liar you are,' she said, but without censure. 'I'll ring Mummy.'

Yet it was typical of his relationship with Aunt Bess and Uncle Matt that when he got to Troy, and they guessed about Fennel, he did not mind.

Timey, standing at one remove behind Aunt Bess in the hall, greeted Fennel as 'Miss Fennel', and Aunt Bess said at once:

'Of course. When we were away. In the autumn. You're our mysterious visitor. It's rather exciting, isn't it, Matt? We've wondered what you were like, if we would ever meet you, or if perhaps — Timey's so hopeless at describing people — you were a kind of disembodied spirit, a Wili, like in *Giselle*.'

Going upstairs, her arm through his, Aunt Bess whispered, 'Hugh dear, she's quite, quite lovely, with that little heart-shaped face and those green eyes.' She squeezed his arm. 'I'm so glad Jean thought of inviting her.'

'You do like her, Aunt Bess?'

It was a perfect Easter week-end. Spring was early, and the black-thorn was thrusting through the hedgerows — white buds like coronets round dark high spikes; the plum trees in the orchard were sugaring with blossom; the leaves of cherries were a whisper of bronze behind the silvery pink of small, tight buds.

There were a lot of people staying — Matthew Jegon liked a house

full of guests for the point-to-points on Easter Monday — and Hugh knew most of them.

It was all exactly as it always had been; yet it was not what he had planned. Somewhere, he had made a profound and rather shameful miscalculation. In some way he had overstated his case by bringing Fennel to Troy, when he had not even been able to tell his father about leaving the factory. He felt like a hobbledehoy whenever he remembered it.

On Sunday, walking back from church with Jean, across the fields, he said, 'You like her, Jean, don't you?'

It was a frontal attack. Jean looked at him curiously, a look he could not interpret.

'Why did you say you weren't in love with her?' she said.

He swiped at the tight bud of a thistle, watched it soar away into the air, and was speaking before it hit the ground.

'Am I?' He looked away. 'And if I were, isn't a genteel reserve one of the privileges of the higher mammals? Us upper ten?'

'People usually show their feelings.'

'Not me — ever!'

She laughed. 'You do. That's just what I'm telling you.'

'It's pretty generally accepted I haven't any.'

'I'd forgotten. What a bore for you.'

'But they grow, don't they? You can't really be without them.'

He was holding the stick like a sabre, like an infant with a wooden sword. He had said something very silly; silly and revealing.

'Like teeth, perhaps,' he said pleasantly. 'You don't have any to start with, then you have baby ones that fall out, then the grown-up ones rot away and get pulled out. That's civilization. Finally you get a false set that really work; and other people know those are feelings, because they're like everybody else's. Then you're all right.'

She said nothing, and after a moment he went on: 'I'm right, aren't I?' Then he said, 'I don't want to feel any more. I want to know. It's better.'



She still said nothing. They turned into the long, sunken lane that led up to the road. Sunning itself in a dusty warm patch by a ditch of nettles was a small brown-mottled snake.

'Deaf as an adder,' he said. He squatted down carefully beside it and snapped his fingers. The snake stirred. He made passes with his hand gently before its eyes, whistling drily, as you do when you are doing a horse, and the snake's head began to weave in time with his hands. Or was it the tune? Perhaps anyone could charm them. He was reaching out his hand towards it, when Jean said sharply: 'Kill it.'

He stood up. Watched the snake slide curving away into hiding among the nettle stalks. 'No,' he said. 'You haven't answered my question.'

'What do you want me to say?'

Between the lane and the orchard the gipsies always camped in autumn, and the earth was black and infected with the scabs of old fires. A chamber pot rested by an old blue kettle. Jean said slowly, 'She's got all her teeth.'

'She's alive, Jean. She sees things at the second they happen. Feels. Knows. Now. Here. That's important, isn't it? Most people don't. Not till afterwards. They imagine too slowly. Years too slowly sometimes.'

She said, 'Or too fast. Like you.' She prodded a rusty chain with her stick. 'Or not at all. Like you too.'

Everything was so near the surface. Surely he only needed to find one word.

'She's awfully good, somehow, at being a woman.'

'Is she?'

He had an instinct for other people's personalities. He could sense pretty exactly how they would be towards him at any given moment. Now he needed to hear what Fennel was really like. Some vital decision depended on seeing her with someone else's eyes. Yet he felt he was only boring Jean by insisting.

'She lives so awfully near the end of her tether,' he said.

She was surprised he spotted that. 'Mummy said she was fey.'



'No.' He shook his head urgently. 'Oh, I can't explain.'

'Why try?'

Sunlight was on fresh dug earth, and going through the door in the orchard wall they met a warm, lonely smell like summer.

'You see, when her mother died she was all alone. In Venice.' He was surprised at the patient teaching note in his voice. 'There was only her fiddle teacher that she knew; and her guardian — an old Italian friend of her mother's. She called him Uncle. Uncle Umberto.'

A feeling like a vivid picture in his mind — Guardi-like sunlight on a faded painted blue lagoon; honey-coloured churches; sepia stones walling a canal; a leggy girl with Fennel's eyes wandering, wandering; sobbing as if her heart would break ... 'She was only fifteen, and he seduced her.'

But he still had to explain. 'He was good to her and kind. He was the only person she could turn to ...'

She struck with her stick at a small piece of mirror hung to scare birds, and mad patterns of light chased across their faces.

'I don't think you should have told me that.'

Suddenly he realized it was a lie.

He said, in a dry, aghast sort of voice that he could hardly recognize: 'Forget I said it. Forget it. Please forget.'

'I have.'

He began to talk at random. He pointed at the notice by the stables.

'Beware of the doge,' he said.

But in the end he escaped from Venice.

What he had done was quite unpardonable. He must say goodbye to Fennel. He must go away, without ever letting her know why.

But the week-end went on as if nothing had happened. Most of the time he seemed to be almost boringly high-spirited. He had to be; there were tiny gaps in time when he came upon himself in his mind, crouched in a kind of squalid, frozen misery, and had to escape hastily into the outside world. And whenever he saw

Fennel — catching her eye across the dinner table, or over a puppy's ears when they paid the customary visit to kennels; glimpsing her dancing, or chattering with a group by the tents as he was saddling up at the point-to-points — it was like seeing her from a long way away as if he had never seen her before and could be coldly objective. He noted how the men of the party gravitated towards her; noted her response to the stimulus of each fresh face — a dancer's shift of balance towards her partner — her easy acceptance of other men; and he remembered what Diana had said about her at their first meeting.

He did not see much of her, on the Monday. He had to get ready for the point-to-points. In the Hunt race he rode a halfbred mare Uncle Matt was trying to sell to Major Dalby. At the last fence he broke a rein; but Dalby bought the horse just the same. Then, in the Maiden Hunters race, he rode Moonraker. It was the horse's first race. It should have been exciting. It meant nothing at all. He won from a poorish field by fifteen lengths. Moonraker was hardly going fast enough to keep himself warm.

Coming away from the stewards' tent with his prize money and the cup, he met Fennel. She was alone, for once. Then she was plaiting Moonraker's mane between her fingers.

'Hugh, couldn't we go somewhere by ourselves tonight — a country pub somewhere — and go up to London tomorrow on our own? We could say I've a lesson early tomorrow.'

He was touched that she should have suggested a lie. It was always a shock to find that other people lied; but that anyone should adjust the truth just to be with him was like a deeply reassuring revelation. Perhaps they could have one more day together — if he had the guts to behave as if he had done nothing.

They went to Middleton, on the coast between Climping and Felpham, still separated by the salt-marshes from the encroaching suburbs of Bognor. The inn was a grey stone building, with a Trafalgar balcony and tall windows looking out over salt-marshes, groynes and sea. Downstairs was just a fisherman's snug and bar,

a place of swinging oil-lamps and dark, varnished wall-papers; but the rooms upstairs were large and graceful.

And Middleton was a part of childhood, with its drowned church — ‘Like the “Cathédrale Engloutie”,’ he said — and the churchyard which the sea had swallowed within living memory, so that skeletons had been washed ashore during gales for years after, and there was a story of at least one football match that had been played with skulls on the beach.

There was an old, slightly grey-bearded woman rocking a chair in the doorway of a cottage: ancient sprouting mummy face, glaucous malicious eye, swollen disjointed hands, swaying to and fro, witchlike.

‘Fennel!’ He pointed through the iron vines of the balcony. ‘Middleton’s witch! She imagined the flood. She started the whole thing.’

For a moment it was almost fun. He made up a highly coloured eye-witness account of the end of Middleton. They both laughed a lot at the wonderful ghoulish touches that occurred to him. But he could not stop. In the twilight they walked along the sea road beside the tide-piled stones; and he had to go on building his world of words — bored, bored, somehow perversely bored.

An old boat, rotting and bird-haunted, a hundred yards inland — ‘The ark — Fennel! — the witches’ ark.’ A cormorant — ‘Poor drowned souls, that’s what they call them round here. Sea ghost-sies!’

Coiled bleached springs of old sheep droppings in a sand-silted lane that did not end even at the tide’s edge, but ran on — ‘Judgment Day, Fennel. The sheep trying to stay with the goats. It’s plain — plain. The poor sheep were all at sea.’

‘So’m I.’

In the most ordinary voice in the world, she added: ‘Wouldn’t it be simpler to tell me what’s happened?’

A wavelet trilled over the smallest stones.

‘No.’

But safety had gone, with the end of talking. He said, at a tangent,

yet his voice sounded heavily purposeful: 'You got awfully thick with that chap in the gunners, Geoffrey's friend.'

'Jealous?'

She turned blinking, as if to clear her vision and see him afresh.

'But you aren't. Weren't. You'd have gone right away if you'd been jealous. You'd have been an orphaned but so generous and understanding child somewhere not too far out of the picture.'

He was immensely surprised that she could see him so clearly, so bitterly, and still like him.

'But I am — all the time.'

That wasn't true, and he knew it.

In the snug behind them, someone began to sing 'Danny Boy'. The piano had a note missing.

'What have you got to be jealous of?' Her face, palely luminous in the dark light, turned towards him.

He said, 'The past ... your Uncle Umberto ...'

A moment ago he had been peering into the dusk to see her face. Now he had the feeling of seeing with a startling sharpness. Her skin had a transparent, fragile delicacy, as though she had lost a lot of blood. Her greenish brown eyes held a kind of final reproach.

He said: 'No,' and again, 'No. I oughtn't to have said that. It's a lie. I told Jean something yesterday ... something quite unpardonable.'

He told her, standing on a little hummock of grass, like a prisoner in the dock, speaking in the impartial, factual kind of way — as if he scorned to make any excuses — which alone made it possible to tell her at all.

'Don't ask me why. I don't know. I must be mad.'

He turned to go away. She heard the movement in the dark, and said, sharply — so that he knew she could not forgive him:

'Hugh.'

'There isn't anything else to say.'

'How did you know? Do you read my diaries too?'

He hit her, then. Hard. On the face. With his fist.

'Don't you understand?' he said. 'I made it up. I'm like that.'

Then he understood.

Someone came out of the bar and walked away down the road. A voice came: 'We won't be druv, I said,' and was shut off as the door swung to. There was a blankness of silence and darkness; and a small cold breeze, running between them.

He said, 'Oh God. I'm so terribly sorry.'

He turned away, up the shingle. He had gone a few steps when she called:

'Hanky.'

She dabbed her eyes. Her mouth.

He said, 'Fennel. It wasn't against you.'

She put the handkerchief back in his breast pocket.

'Some day I'll tell you about it,' she said.

'You don't have to tell me. I don't want to know.'

'You do.'

When they were having a drink in the snug before going up to bed he noticed that she was wearing a wedding ring. He had not thought of that. It seemed so practical and thorough.

Later, when the tide was turning over the stones on the beach below, he wakened. Silhouetted against the moonlight, Fennel was sitting up, her back against the wooden bed-head, her knees drawn up to her chin. She looked as if she were on guard by a fire in some great forest.

She knew at once that he was awake.

'I was listening to you living,' she said. 'Your breathing — it changes rhythm all the time. With how you feel, what you're dreaming.'

'Like a dog, Ranter?'

'It's a terribly complicated life you lead inside.' Her voice was slow and musing. 'You stopped breathing once — for so long I was frightened.'

'I've always done that.' For some reason he sounded triumphant.

'No habits at all,' she said in a distracted sort of way like scolding. 'Not even in your breathing.'



'None at all?'

'You've got such sensitive feelers. You're like a cat when you first meet things, people. You learn about them with everything — your skin — your bones — everything. And you're terribly articulate — you do talk such a lot, darling. But there aren't any habits in between. You've got two languages and you can't translate from one to t'other.'

She poked him in the ribs with her forefinger.

'That's why you have to make up true stories about people.'

'I must have been mad. I shall never forgive myself.'

She slid down beside him.

'Oh, do stop. What's mad about knowing the truth without being told? I'm glad. Glad. Because it means you've met me.'

Then she added, 'Sometimes I've wondered.'

It was nearly morning, nearly the moment when he would have to face his father, when she said suddenly: 'Darling,' in what he always thought of as her 'practical' voice.

'Darling. Now you've left the factory, would it be a good idea if you found a room near me? We could be together more. You could eat at the flat. I'm quite a good cook. It'd be cheaper than fares and so on.'

'It's an idea.'

'You don't have to marry me. It's not even an improper proposal. You have your house and I have mine.'

'I don't think I can.'

She said, 'Oh,' rather sadly.

'Fennel. I'm going to leave home just as soon as I'm twenty-one.'

He had never realized that before, but it was true. That was his time limit.

'What's the magic in being twenty-one?'

'Just that then I shall have kept my bargain.'

'What a funny word.'

'I promised Father ...'

But it was part of a story he had told himself to sleep with when he was small. There was a little boy and he ran away because he was



so unhappy, and his father searched and searched until he found him. The poor little chap had not known what to do; he was frightened his father was angry. He had fought to defend his castle. But his father had understood. Even that. His father had cried, and held him tight, and his father had said now Mother was dead there were only the two of them, and they must stick together. Against the world. His father said he needed the little boy.

It all sounded extremely unlikely.

He said, 'You've got to stick to your bargains.'

'You are funny. You've got a sort of outside conscience. It's got a face and eyes and nose and it looks like ... your father? It can be cheated, too. When it's not looking, you don't have a conscience at all.'

He pulled her down into the bed.

'Lucky he can't see us now.'

6

HOLYOAKE'S rubbery, choleric face, poised over the cheque-book on his desk, looked more than ever like a caricature, done in sanguine, of a stage Irishman.

The piggy eyes disengaged themselves from their private vacuum, blinked away the image of the wife who dwelt there — the wife who was mad and would soon have to go to an asylum — and smiled uneasily.

'It doesn't seem like six months, does it?' he said.

The tone was faintly hostile, but Holyoake always disliked paying out money. Hugh shook his head politely and Holyoake began to write the cheque.

'One — hundred — and sixty — pounds — ten shillings.'

A hundred and sixty pounds. It was more money than he had ever had at one time in his life. Even in his wildest dreams he had never expected more than a hundred or so. He felt a surge almost of affection for Holyoake for keeping the bargain so casually made

six months before; for not needing to be reminded about it; perhaps just for giving him a hundred and sixty pounds all at once. Yet at the same time there was a sense of insecurity, of bad luck, as if it would have been safer if Holyoake had failed to pay up.

It had all been too easy. Too brilliant and glib. Like a con man's steer. Ever since Easter there had been a tiny, excited, panicky feeling at the back of his mind, that things were slipping by too fast, the bit in their teeth; not quite under control; as if he were living on capital. A feeling that some day coming inexorably closer there would be a catastrophe; the bill would be presented and he would not be able to meet it.

After Easter he had come back from Troy nerved to tell his father the whole truth about leaving the factory. But when he got home, his father was not there. He was away painting, and he might be away for months. So he had only had to tell Aunt Hilda. It was always easier to tell women things; there was always a sort of complicity when a woman who knew you listened; and Hilda knew him very well. He had not lied. But it had not been necessary to tell her much more than his reasons for leaving: the reasons he had given to Uncle Alexander. She thought he had been foolish — but the follies of youth were generous and warm-hearted. She would explain to his father, she said. It felt as if he had lied.

Holyoake tore off the cheque, waved it to dry, and held it out. He said gruffly:

'You're a good chap, young Hugh, you know. Meant a lot to know there's someone in charge. A Sahib.'

Even across the desk the gin breath was noticeable. His wife must be bad again.

Hugh murmured something about having done nothing.

Holyoake shook his head.

'I knew you were top weight the first day, when I found you doing out Toby's stall. I told Margery that night: That's good enough for me; there's never much wrong with a chap who insists on doing his own horse.'

If Holyoake had said that once, he had said it twenty times. In

his fiercely bumbling naive way, just as he knew that men with brown eyes always let you down, that you could tell a lady by her ankles, he knew that the only reliable index of character was a man's care for his horse. Hugh had passed that test. There was no other.

Within a month Holyoake had been leaving him in charge for days on end, while he went off 'to see to things — at home'. There had been nothing very much to do. He got on well with Harper, the head lad, and between them they had managed well enough. There was nothing to that, though; he had been getting on with stable lads ever since he could remember. Yet every time Holyoake came back, pasty-faced and shaking, his breath rotten with gin, and found everything as it should be, his good opinion of Hugh was confirmed. He would thank him for having 'coped so well', for being 'so' loyal'. It was rather embarrassing.

Bit by bit, as if it were a secret and not something the lads all knew and laughed about in the tack room, Holyoake had taken to confiding in him about his wife's illness. It was always 'illness', never 'madness'. To be mad was something dirty, degrading beyond any admitting. Holyoake was too loyal ever to call his wife mad.

But even there, he had had to pay very little for Holyoake's regard. One day Holyoake had been bumbling about Margery and her headaches, and one had said bluntly, carelessly, for no reason that one could discover — out of boredom perhaps — 'Aren't you just fooling yourself, Captain Holyoake? Wouldn't it be the best thing to take her to a psychiatrist?'

There had been tears in Holyoake's eyes then; and without saying a word he had disappeared for the rest of the day.

Next day, though, Holyoake had taken him on one side, and thanked him touchingly for being true friend enough to speak the truth. 'It pulled me up with a shock, old Hugh. I can tell you ... it was a shock ... but perhaps that was what I needed.'

It was dreadful. He talked about 'an old head on young shoulders', and came to one for advice — humbly, as to a friend.

Now, at the door, Holyoake was saying, 'Margery's seeing the specialist again tonight.' His eyes met Hugh's and dropped. 'I've left fifty pounds in the safe for the feed bills.' They were not due until the end of the month, over a fortnight ahead. 'I'll be away for a day or so.'

'She'll be better, Captain Holyoake. It's best not to worry.'

'She is. She is. This new doctor man was only saying how much ...' But he did not believe enough in what he was saying to finish the sentence. 'We had a long talk, only yesterday, the quack and I. He wants her to go ... go into a hospital for a bit.'

Holyoake shook his head in a bewildered way, and was gone.

Hugh was standing at the window watching him go away through the rain, when he saw Mrs Legge James arrive.

The open Bentley came round the corner very fast, and ploughed the gravel to a stop. Bowler-hatted, mackintoshed, Robin Legge James waved her gauntleted hand. Through the loose window frames came a dying breath of Chanel Numéro Cinq. Boots by Moykopf. Breeches by Tautz. But cigarettes by Gold Flake, to keep the common touch.

He heard her in the yard, her voice high-pitched, hoarse and arrogant, exhausting its energy in being upper-class.

'Oh no! Not the skewbald again, I do hate the brute so. Be an angel and give me my divine Toby, Willy. Please. Please, Willy,' she wheedled. She was quite shameless.

He heard the sound of hooves being led away. He waited long enough for Willy to pocket the tip, and picking a whip from the rack went out across the yard. Willy was saddling Toby.

He gave Willy a dressing down; told him to saddle the skewbald again for Mrs Legge James. Then he told Robin that he would not have her interfering with stable orders, and stalked out of the yard as if he were very angry.

Outside, by the loose boxes, Harper winked infinitesimally.

'Bit short with her, weren't you?'

'She likes it.'

The odd thing was, that was true. It was too easy to be tough with

her. And that was why he was going to ride her horse Furious at Newbury ...

... It had been a day of windy rain, and they had set up the jumps in the shed for the afternoon's ride. There had been a half-hour to spare before the ride was due to start, and Harper, ex-sergeant rough-rider, ex-jockey, ex-circus-groom, had been teaching Hugh the rather showy circus trick in which the rider, hanging from the stirrup, picks up a handkerchief at a gallop.

He tried it over several times and muffed it each time. But Harper said, 'You've almost got it. It's just the rhythm, and watching his leading leg. It's coming, sir.' So he tried once more.

This time there was no mistake. He timed it perfectly and rode on, waving the handkerchief.

'Applaws pleeze,' he said.

Bowing to right and left to imaginary cheers, he was riding up to Harper, when from behind came the sound of soft clapping. It was Mrs Legge James, smiling her self-mocking conspiratorial smile, joining in his bloody childish game, as if it were public property.

'Bis, bis,' she said.

There was nothing he could say.

But the ride went badly from the start. Within five minutes even his most reliable pupils were snatching at the reins, losing their irons, mistiming their approaches. He halted them all and gave them a slow, clear analysis of what collecting a horse for a jump entailed. He demonstrated. To draw attention to herself, Miss Oakley asked a question. She had not understood a thing.

Then Robin caught his eye. She made a little wry mouth of sympathy.

'It must be absolute hell for a marvellous horseman like you to have to teach people like that.'

It was only when he was riding on that he realized she had been speaking in French. Very well. She had asked for it. She did that a sight too often.

Just to show, he went over the jumps, arms folded, without stirrups or reins. He sat up very straight when he came round



to face Robin again, and he was angrier than ever, because he felt he had been showing off.

'That's what they teach them in the army. Anyone care to try?'

Holyoake would have had a fit. Most of them were not really up to it, and it was silly to undermine their confidence. But the two boys Derek and Tim wanted to try, and he let them. Tim managed to hang on all the way round.

He glanced at Robin, one slightly dismissive glance, and walked his horse away.

'I don't want anyone to try who doesn't feel up to it,' he said.

Most of the others relaxed. You could hear them doing it. But when he looked at Robin again, she was fumbling with her leathers. Her face was white. She came off at the first jump, falling like a sack of potatoes. She lay still for long enough for him to be afraid she had hurt herself; but she got up, brushed the tan off her breeches, and Willy gave her a leg up into the saddle again.

The hour over, she fell back to ride beside him.

'You are a cruel devil, aren't you?' Her voice was modulated to a kind of hoarse, gentle whisper. 'And you simply adore it. Like a Cossack. I can see you in a long *tcherkess* with silver cartridges, and a little furry *kalpack*, using the knout. Loving every moment of it.'

'It's called a *nagaika*,' he said coldly. 'Not a knout.'

'You might be a Cossack, with those high cheekbones,' she said. 'And those arrogant eyes. A Russian exile.'

'Perhaps I am,' he said. It was the sort of damn silly thing she always made him say.

She smiled the sentimentally cynical smile that made her lips look as though they had been hacked off short with a knife.

'I've been meaning to ask you for a long time,' she said. 'If you're free would you care to ride Furious for my husband? At Newbury? He'll win. All you've got to do is ride a waiting race,' she said. 'You're so good at that.'

He said, 'I've only point-to-pointed.' He wondered if he had ever said anything to make her think he was a star performer over the sticks. 'Can't you get a jockey?'



'You're very English, aren't you?' She made it sound derisive. 'Even when you're being boorish.'

'Why me?'

'Funny,' she said. 'Most people would have jumped at the chance.'

He only wanted to get away. He heard himself saying, ungraciously, 'Very well. If that's what you want.' He would not leave her any chance of the last word. 'It will lengthen the odds.'

... She had asked him once, hacking across the common, at the tail of the crocodile, if he had ever seen *Cyrano*. She had, of course; with the younger Coquelin. She would have. The point seemed to be that she thought he was not unlike Christian in the play. When she came to settle her account, she brought her copy to lend him. When she put it on the table it opened at the much-fingered page where *Cyrano* explains the meaning of a kiss to Roxane on the balcony above.

' "Le point sur l'i de la verbe aimer" ... "Un serment" ... '

She had quoted from memory — the book was upside down to her. 'It looks as if it had been read before.'

She had said, 'Of course,' but her eyes had lit up as if he had shown a quite unexpected skill.

He decided to tell Fennel that very night, about riding Furious.

He bought flowers at the flower shop by Hampstead station and walked up across the Heath. When he reached the lime trees he looked up to catch the first glimpse of light in her window; but there was no light there. As he got nearer he could see the windows, blank and bare, and through them, reflected on the white ceiling, the light from the other window at the side; then he realized there were no curtains.

When he rang there was no answer, and the sound of the bell had a deserted quality, as if he could hear empty rooms, the debris of tissue paper on the floor, drawers pulled out — an odd stocking left hanging. Then he was banging at the door with palms flat, as if to drum her out from hiding.

A door opened on the floor above. A head appeared over the curve of the banisters at the top of the stairs.

'What's all that row? What's going on?'

The voice spiralled out among the landings, as if blown through a sea-shell.

He stayed quite still, pressing out of sight against the door, until the man went back into his flat.

Fennel was not there.

He had always known it could not last. He wondered if she had gone back to Italy ...

Four months before — it was June, and very hot — he had arrived one evening to find her excited, in the exalted, rather formal, way that always made him think she looked as Mozart's music sounded. She had moved the table into the window and the sunshine. It was laid for dinner — a lobster, salad, a bottle of hock, strawberries — and there were flowers everywhere.

He said, 'Someone's left you a fortune.'

She said, 'Don't be cross. I know it's terribly extrav. But we adore lobster — at least I do, and that's the same thing. I've got tickets for *Rosenkavalier*, too.'

She was watching his face as if to see if he was really pleased.

'It's only a musical comedy, *Rosenkavalier*. You're such a highbrow. But it's like us — sentimental.'

Her face had the delicate, translucent look it had when she had been crying; but she seemed so happy, so intent, that he had been afraid to ask questions.

So they dined — with mock formality at first, and then picnicking — and went to the Opera, and afterwards came back to the flat. When she was making coffee, he spotted that something was missing from the mantelshelf.

'You've rearranged the collection,' he said.

'Things can't always be the same.'

'I like them the same. The little golden Buddha isn't there.'

She peered into the coffee-pot. 'I pawned it.'

'Fennel — darling Fennel — you shouldn't have. Not just for me.'

A minute afterwards it seemed unbearably self-centred to have thought such a thing even for a second; but at that moment he put his arms round her, as she waited, forefinger on the knob of the pot, for the coffee to clear.

She kissed him briefly, and pushed him away.

When she was pouring out the coffee she said gently, 'Even for you I wouldn't pawn Mummy's Buddha.'

She put the cup down in front of him.

He said quickly, 'No. I know that. I know that.'

'I had a penny ha'penny in my bag this morning.'

He ought to have known. He ought to have noticed.

'How do you think I live, Hugh?'

'I thought you had ... ' he began.

He was going to say, 'I thought you had an allowance,' but whatever he said would seem insufferable. He had never thought about it at all. He was ashamed.

'I have an allowance. That's what you were going to say. Sixty pounds a year. It pays the rent — just. I've never worried you about it, but — all the concerts and things we go to ... going to France that week at Whitsun ... you like nice things to eat — it all costs money. I know you pay your share; but if I were alone I'd boil an egg and make a cup of tea. Where do you think the money comes from?'

He went to the tallboy; took his savings tin from the top drawer — 'his drawer'; held it out.

She stared at him. She did not even look at the tin.

'There's nearly fifty pounds there,' he said. 'Forty-eight pounds ten, to be exact. It's yours.'

He pushed the tin at her hands but she would not open them to take it.

'Please, Fennel.'

The tin fell to the floor, rolling in eccentric circles until the lid came off and the money spilled.

He could not pick it up, of course. But he said, like a fool, fool, fool: 'It's all I've got' — as if she were rejecting the widow's mite.

She turned away to the long window, pulling the curtains sharply to blot out the watching dark. She moved the azalea to one side of the sill, and pink crystal flowers trembled against the worn golden satin curtains.

'It was a pretty safe offer to make, wasn't it?' Her voice was suddenly coldly viperish.

He was frightened then. It was one of those moments when you realize that the other person knows all about you, and whatever you say or do can only be interpreted in the light of that knowledge.

He said, inescapably, incurably small: 'Why?' But he knew why.

'I can borrow the money from Uncle Matt,' he said. It sounded criminally optimistic.

'Give me the ticket,' he said. 'I'll get it out.'

She might have been staring out of the window in a reverie; but the curtains were drawn.

'If you won't give it to me I'll take it,' he said.

Her bag was on the bed. He picked it up, rattled it to let her know he had it. She turned and watched him.

Tucked away in a pocket of the bag were three pawn tickets: for a brooch, for a ring, and for the Buddha.

He had not even noticed. He had not even thought ... Oh God ...

She began, in a disinterested, dutiful sort of way, to make her preparations for the night. It was exactly as if he was not there. She cleared away cups, turned down the bed-cover, loosened her hair.

He said, 'I suppose I'd better go.' By the door he said, 'Fennel, I've never thought.'

'I expect that's what it is.'

'I'm so terribly sorry.'

'Then that's all right, isn't it?'

He could find nothing to say. He closed the door very slowly behind him. It must be the end. He had lost everything. It was all over, and it was his own fault.

The days ahead loomed shamefully lonely. He told himself he did not care. What was done was done. Not to care was the secret of power. If people could not hurt you, you were free.

Two days later, in the evening, he rang her up and there was no reply. It was Thursday. She might be at the Queen's Hall. He went there at once, just to know.

He patrolled with emphatic nonchalance until the people began to crowd out of the hall, then he hurried up the steps of All Saints Church to stand hidden in the shadow.

When he saw her, she was with two young men. They had long scarves wound round their necks and he supposed they were students. They were all laughing together.

He followed them at a distance, walking up Portland Place, standing in the shadows just outside a street lamp's yellow ring while they waited for a bus. It was what was meant by 'skulking'. He could not let the two young men see him; it would be indecent, like a beggar showing his sores.

The bus came. The two men got on it, and Fennel waved.

Then she came straight to him.

It was so unexpected, that he turned away limping, unrecognizable.

She called, 'Hugh, Hugh. Don't be a fool.' She ran after him. 'What is this nonsense?'

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I was being a nuisance. I'll go away.'

'What are you talking about? Why didn't you come yesterday?'

He wished she had not seen him skulking after her like that in the shadows.

'I thought you wouldn't want me,' he said. It sounded plaintive, so he added, 'You did say "*All is over between us.*"'

'You know I didn't.'

A bus stopped. A man threw a cigarette-end from the top. Hugh stepped on the glow to put it out.

'Silly ass, throwing lighted cigarettes about,' he said angrily.

'Why did you want to believe I did?'

Her white uplifted face seemed aghast, in the shuttered shadows

from the moving bus. She was poised to go; this time for ever.

He blurted out something so important that he was embarrassed: 'Don't go away Fennel. I'm so lonely.'

He took her hand, rubbing the small, weak-seeming knuckles with his forefinger and thumb, as if to bring back life to them so that they could grasp his.

There was a woman standing behind him. She must have heard it all. Her mouth was open to listen. He pulled Fennel away into the shadows as if they were saying a polite good evening.

'Do you think I'm not?' she said.

Her hand was gripping his tightly, and, her fingers laced through his, she slid her hand into the big pocket of her coat, as if to guard it there.

They walked up to Hampstead, hand in hand, slowly, in a silence like ecstasy.

Once he broke the silence.

'I even know what you've been hearing tonight.'

'It's plastered all over London.'

'I didn't look.' He emphasized the rhythm of their steps slightly with his heels. 'The Great C Major — you're walking it,' he said.

He began to chant the last movement. Soon they were almost running.

... He turned away from the empty flat and went downstairs slowly. When he got outside he would destroy the meaningless chrysanthemums.

But in the entrance hall, there was Fennel.

She was paying her milk bill. Her eyes lit up when she saw him, and although the porter was there, and it was one of their strictest rules that they should give the porter no clues to work on, she took his hand and kept it. The porter gave her her letters.

On the top of the pile of letters there was a mottled foreign envelope with an Italian stamp. When she had read the letter she slipped it behind the netsuke on the mantelpiece. She said nothing. When



he told her about Holyoake and the cheque, and suggested going out to celebrate, he had an idea she was relieved.

When they got back to the flat she did not put on the light, as there were no curtains. She had sent them to be cleaned. The window glass shone in the light of the street lamps outside, and hard, straight lines of brick walls outlined a blank of metallic sky.

'It's like being in an empty house,' she said.

'A house you've left.' It was so nearly the question he could not ask. 'That's what I thought this afternoon, when you were out.'

She sighed, 'You don't have to go home?' and it was almost as if she had changed the subject.

In the morning she got breakfast. She sat cross-legged on the bed watching him eat, and then later she was back in bed watching him dress.

He was tying his tie, when he said:

'You're going back to Italy, aren't you?'

He kept on tying his tie. It had to sound like saying it was going to be a nice day.

She said, 'Oh,' in a funny little surprised voice; then, in another voice, very flat and formal, she said: 'My guardian wants me to study for a year with Enesco.'

'Enesco? The Enesco?'

'Yes.'

'I thought it was something like that.' He made his voice sound happy.

'You did know. You always know. But it's Switzerland, not Italy.'

He combed his hair.

'Yes, I knew yesterday. When I saw the letter, I knew.'

How could he be so impassive?

'Not Enesco, of course,' he said.

She said 'Oh' again. 'Oh dear. I'd better read you the letter. But I'll have to translate.'

He said, 'No. You know you don't have to read it to me.' He heard the rustle as she took the letter out of its envelope. On purpose, he did not turn round. 'I'd rather you didn't.'

'Better,' she said.

' "*Cara*." That's only "Dear." Darling, I can't bear it. You're so far away. I need you here.'

He sat on the edge of the bed. With her free hand she pulled him down beside her, circling his neck with her arm, so that she was holding the letter in front of his eyes, as if they were reading it together.

'He grumbles at my not writing,' she said. 'You see, I don't write very much nowadays.'

'No.'

She said, 'You should be glad,' and went on quickly: ' "You've been very much in my thoughts. Reading between the lines of your too infrequent letters I sense an unrest, a dissatisfaction, with — your music? your teachers? your progress? You do not say." ' She paused.

Hugh said, 'Go on.'

' "This may be something that passes, a moment that every artist knows, when technique and understanding seem to nullify each other. But I have to wonder if you are receiving the right teaching at your English school. I am frightened of the young misses at the pianoforte ... Mahler said once the musician had to find an interior secrecy that amounted to not even knowing he was there himself. For you the road to that secrecy has always been intuitive." '

She paused. She seemed puzzled.

'He says about when I was nine I always locked myself in a room to play. It's funny. I don't remember at all. Then he says, "There are people for whom music is always lyrical, personal and ecstatic; in itself a secret. I think you are of these; and for them, as technique advances perhaps, it is always more difficult to reach an inner secrecy ... because technique brings self-consciousness ..." '

She said, 'No,' rather experimentally; then, 'Perhaps,' and she turned the flimsy page. 'It's funny, Italian is an explaining language ... I'd never realized.'

' "You have great talent — a fine ear — a solid left hand technique; perhaps your bow arm is not yet as free and strong as it should be,

but that will come. You need only authority to achieve a great place — authority to dominate an audience — to make them believe that your vision is the only one. Perhaps this cannot be taught. Yet knowing you as I do, I believe there is a way for you to discover it: by study under a great virtuoso who is also a great musician — whom you must revere ... With these thoughts on my heart, through a family connection I approached Enesco. He remembered hearing you play once in Vevey when you were there with your revered mother. He has consented to take you as his personal pupil.” ’

Hugh said, ‘It’s a chance anybody would give their eyes for. Enesco. What a wonderful old chap your guardian must be. Go. You must go.’

His voice was buoyant. He had to be generous, but he felt only a kind of jealousy — like a sense of deficiency because someone else had known first what he ought to have known.

She said, ‘Hugh, is it very dreadful? I’ve got to have success.’

Success would take her away, too.

He was dressed and ready to go. He stood by the door.

‘If we really truly love each other,’ he said, ‘being apart doesn’t matter.’

It sounded improbably platitudinous.

He went back to her and kissed her gently, and stood looking down at her:

‘We’ve got to be realistic,’ he said. ‘It’s a chance in a million and you’ve got to take it.’

She looked unconvinced; repeated, ‘We must be realistic.’

‘We’re young,’ he said. ‘We can wait.’

He moved to the door. Once there, hand on the knob, it was as if he was safer.

‘Oh, Fennel. It will be so lonely,’ he said.

He opened the door and went out. He had not meant to say it; but he went down the corridor slowly — hoping, hoping, to hear the click of the door behind him when she opened it to call him back and tell him she would not go.

He lingered at the top of the stairs, looking back at the empty landing, bright and quiet in the early sun, remembering, as something very discreditable, standing there the night before, knocking in a frenzy because she had gone. A lonely landing in the sunlight. But she did not come.

Abruptly he turned away, hurling himself down each flight of stairs three and four at a time, escaping into the cool lime-scented sunshine of the empty Heath, running down towards the Tube station.

All done, finish.

Ten days later he rode Furious at Newbury. He only told Fennel about it the night before. He had not wanted to bother her when she was so busy, he said. She thought it was sweet of him.

After that, it was strangely as if he had already said goodbye. She came to Newbury to watch him ride Furious, and afterwards they went out together for a wonderful, extravagant evening to celebrate his win; he would come and sit with her in the evenings while she practised the Tschaikowsky concerto, which she was to play at the Academy's concert, and afterwards hand in hand they would wander across the Heath, as they had always done, sometimes going to Poggioli's for supper, sometimes going back to the flat, always making plans for when she came back; they bought each other little presents 'to remember me by' while they were apart — a netsuke, a silver watch-chain like a worm, identical silver pencils with their names engraved, a bear made of soap, a St Christopher medal; he would make complicated excuses to Holyoake, to get away early and meet her at the Academy and take her home ... they had never been together quite so much before. And yet he had no feeling of sadness, no feeling of impending loss, no feeling of anything happening at all. Only a kind of impatience to get it over and done with. He knew to the day, each day, how long was still to go.

Then it was the day before her concert — four days before she

must go. He was curled on the settee listening to her practise. She was making exercises of the fragments of the solo that did not come fluently to her fingers — fragments of rhythms, themes, chords — irrelevant patterns of notes repeated over and over, faster and faster — that had a kind of hypnotic fascination, like watching the tappets and rockers and gauges of an immensely complicated engine working.

She lowered her violin, and unscrewed the nut of the bow.

‘Hugh, will you promise me something?’

‘Yes.’

‘Will you promise you won’t come to the concert?’

‘Oh, Fennel — why?’

She was standing as she would stand before her first entry in the concerto. She looked so frail, and yet so determined, he thought she was like a rapier of the finest steel — a Toledo blade: all supple control.

Suddenly it was something to be decided — a choice — a test; and he did not know the answer.

‘Is that what you want?’ he said.

Even Toledo steel would snap if it were tried too high.

‘You shall lock yourself in your room to play,’ he said.

Later she tried to explain. ‘It’s not against you ...’

‘I know,’ he said.

After the concert she was exhausted, and very near to tears.

‘I played it so badly, Hugh. I was terrified — and I played so badly.’

He put her to bed, and sat to keep her company until she was ready for sleep. When he kissed her good night she said — and she was really crying, her eyes all puffed and swollen:

‘You don’t really care, do you? You weren’t there — you just didn’t care enough to be there.’

‘I promised you.’ He was patient — understanding, he hoped.

‘But you weren’t there. You weren’t there.’

He stood quite helpless, not knowing what to do or to say.

‘You never are there when you’re needed.’

He knelt by the bed and put his arm round her shoulders.  
'Poor darling,' he said. 'You're so very very tired.'  
'If you loved me you'd have been there.'

It was the day before she was going. He took the afternoon off. Holyoake was not there to ask, so he just left.

When he reached the flat the door was open and he wandered in. A trunk stood by the door, tied and labelled.

Fennel said, 'If you want tea, you must make it yourself, and please, please keep out of the way.'

He said, 'Will you marry me, Fennel? I mean now. Today. Or rather day after tomorrow. I'll get a special licence.'

'I'd still have to go away,' she said.

'But — Fennel. You know I didn't mean that.'

He wandered over and stared out of the window. On the road under the lime trees a man wound the handle of a barrel-organ. Three children watched, a shy, intent group. A woman marched past the cap on the pavement, stepping deliberately across the beat to show she was not using the music and need not pay. The rhythm, exaggerated by a fault in the mechanism, beat faintly on the closed window.

He said, 'The answer seems to be no.'

'We've got to be realistic, Hugh. What about your father?'

'He isn't everything, Fennel. It's my life. You always talk as if I were so terribly obedient.'

'You'd have to have his permission. You're not twenty-one.'

The children were dancing — three little *pas seuls*, at a distance from the barrel-organ. Perhaps they could not pay either.

'Shall I get tea?' he said.

She said gently, 'Did you really mean it, Hugh?'

The barrel-organ man moved a brass pointer on an enamel dial. The tune changed to 'In questa reggia', and the children made little tentative steps to catch the new rhythm. A woman's voice, thin in the distance, and harsh, like a sound forced from a reed, yelled, 'Maudie — Maudie — come 'ere. Come 'ere at once.' A



leggy girl, blank-eyed in the swift useless mutiny of childhood, walked slowly away.

'I even bought a ring.'

It was an emerald, set plain in a plain gold claw. It had cost his exact winnings at Newbury. They had admired it together in Boucheron's window weeks before.

He squatted down on his heels beside her, and gave her the box. She opened it, but she was looking at him — as if she understood something he did not.

'I've got to go, darling — to Switzerland.'

Testily, he said, 'I know that. We agreed that.' But with a kind of embarrassment, he kissed her in the corner of neck and shoulder, got up, slipped away to the window. The barrel-organ was trundling down the road, away. The children had gone.

Fennel said quietly, 'It's so lovely, Hugh ...' and then, in the guise of silence, there was — just nothing.

'If we could — if only we could —' he began, 'if I had any guts —' and stopped. But she did not say anything.

Then abruptly, movement and words larger than he intended, larger than truth, he swung round, strode towards her, said wildly, 'I'm coming with you. I'll get a job. Washing dishes. As a groom. Giving English lessons. I'm coming, Fennel. I won't let you stop me.'

She shook her head, looking down still at the ring in its box. She said steadily, 'You've got to have permits — *permis de séjour — permis de travail*.'

'I could be clandestine about it.'

'What about your father?'

For the space of a half-second he hesitated. What he should say would not even form in his mind.

'It's only for a year, Hugh darling.'

That was only a kind of politeness. She said a lot of things about his job; about having to save to be a vet; about staying at home until he was twenty-one; his 'bargain'.

Tact. They both knew he had not the guts to defy his father.

He said harshly, 'You don't want me to come with you, do you, because you're going back to Umberto.'

He went to the window again, resting his head on the pane. He could not really have said that — he did not even believe it.

'If that's what you want,' he said, 'it's O.K. by me.' His voice seemed distorted — by pain.

She said, 'You don't believe that.'

'What else can I believe?' He went on, speaking to his own breath on the window, not to her, 'And you don't even deny it.'

And then he was on his knees beside her, pulling her to him, pleading.

'I don't know what made me say it. I know it's not true — I was mad. You've got to forgive me — say you forgive me, please Fennel, please. Even if you can't.'

'Of course I forgive you.' Her voice was maternal, open-minded, practical.

'Say it properly, Fennel, please.'

'Don't let's say any more. Please, please don't spoil our last day.' She held out the box to him. 'Aren't you going to put it on my finger?'

It was all right.

But next day when he watched the Continental train steam away, he knew he had lost her.

She could never believe anything he said or felt again.

He could not himself.

## 7

He spent that evening at home. He had not spent a Thursday evening at home for a long time.

Aunt Hilda was away, and he and his father had their supper alone, getting the meal for themselves. His father made an omelette — an involved affair with onions, bacon, and far too many eggs; and routing round the kitchen finding

things for his father, while his father presided at the pan, was for them to be involved in a tiny little lawless conspiracy together, an intimacy that was real, and gentle, and funny.

At the table he could feel himself tense and over-anxious — trying to preserve the bond there had been in the kitchen. But there was no need. It was only very rarely that he could persuade his father into a mood of reminiscence, but sometimes then Aubrey would talk for hours, telling stories of his tours of Europe. He had the painter's eye for detail, and an uncanny memory for the things people had said — their exact words. Hugh always felt that to listen to his father's stories was to learn about life, and men, and ideas. In his reminiscences his father came to life as the father of childhood, the father of whom he told so many stories that seemed to be lies until a time like this, when Aubrey forgot, and let them be true.

Now he had a story of making an omelette for a Corsican bandit, and painting his portrait by way of ransom when the bandit held him prisoner — 'for his company'. It was a good story and Hugh listened entranced. Yet there was a feeling that to listen was to comfort.

The story ended. Like a fool he had to say, 'When was that, Father?' — and the mood was shattered.

'You always have to bring everything back to yourself, boy!' His father pushed back his chair. 'I'd like a word with you,' he said, and led the way into his studio.

His father said, 'How are you getting on in your job?'

'Very well, I think, Father. I've had a rise.'

'I can't say it appeals to me, the idea of your being a groom — jockey — whatever it is. But it's your life ...' He pulled the easel forward. 'We don't see much of you, these days. You're spending a lot of time away from home. Too much, I think.'

So that was it. How very funny.

'When it's my turn for the early ride I sleep there. There isn't a train to get me to work early enough for the liver brigade, Father. We start at six.'

Aubrey tilted the picture. 'I rang you up last night. You weren't there.'

Grey swirls of paint analysed a chaos of cloud and rain, wind-driven against two bleached haystacks high on a down. The massed convolutions of grey light had an involved rhythm that gave the painted air a kind of remote vigour — an unliving vigour — as of ghosts whirling above the ashes of their dead. A human figure crouched under the ash-coloured haystacks: a woman with a red scarf slatting in the wind. She was there for the composition, of course.

'What time was that, Father? I might have been out getting something to eat.'

He was pretty sure he was safe. Harper was too much an old soldier to have given him away. But one could never be quite sure — about anybody; anybody could betray you. It was something they had to do.

Aubrey took a palette knife and brush, and set to work; and it was as if he was deliberately falsifying his earlier vision.

Hugh said, 'It's all over now, Father, too. Now the mornings are dark I shan't be starting much before nine.' He laughed. 'Thank heavens.'

Two days later he was escorting six women riders across the common.

... 'Yes Mrs Oates. The leaves are falling.'

... 'Yes. They go a wonderful colour in glycerine.'

... 'Shall we let those smelly cars pass before we cross, Mrs Godby?'

He supposed he must have been polite. But he was conscious only of monotonous, obsessive silence inside himself — a resentful pre-occupation with nothing at all.

Robin was talking, talking, fretting him as if she were keeping him from sleep ... Some story of a race meeting in Wiesbaden during her days with the British Army of Occupation after the War.

'Grantly and I were in the general's box. Rudy was riding.

You'll disapprove, of course, you're such a puritan, but we were having the most violent affair,' she said. 'Have you ever read *Anna Karenina*?'

'I expect so.'

'Remember when Anna sees Vronsky's horse fall, and gives everything away to Karenin by running out to the course? Well, Rudy's horse fell, and I swear I did no more than clench my hand. Enormous self-control. But then I saw Grantly just looking at my hand. There was a tiny split in the seam of my glove. You can't hide that sort of thing.'

'No.'

'Rudy was such a divine cad. You look very like him, at times.'

'I look like everybody.'

They were coming to the archway leading into the stable-yard — a wide, rounded arch of yellow brick over five-foot-high green double doors. Abruptly, without motive or volition, Hugh set the flea-bitten grey at the doors.

Surprised, the animal had no chance to refuse. It gathered itself — and jumped. As they rose to clear the gates, Hugh tucked his head down beside the horse's, to miss the arch — and only then remembered the cobbles in the yard.

He was doing something that was shamefully, criminally careless; something so contrary to all his training and his own conception of himself that he would never even be able to think of it again without wanting to hide; and he was praying he would be killed. He had only to pull the horse's head round as its forefeet touched down, and he would be flung forward and down and his neck would break. Best.

But instinctively, he threw the reins to the horse to leave it free. He was gripping with knees and thighs and heels and his hands were tight on the pommel: but the horse was free — and by itself the horse would do it. The grey landed, jarring, slithering on the wet stones, stumbling — but going forward; not falling.

Holyoake, his face a red scowl above a blue polka-dotted scarf, was staring at him across the yard.

He dismounted. The horse cracked its nostrils, stood to let him feel his legs, spattering his coat with saliva.

Holyoake was standing by him.

'Well?'

'I'm sorry.' He was almost whispering. 'It was an awful thing to do.'

The direct admission seemed to shock Holyoake, like a dirty story.

'I'd better see you later,' he said. His voice was scornful, his face was closed in anger. He turned away.

Willy led the horse away. He did not look at Hugh.

Hugh was left alone. He felt very small.

But lurking in his mind was a small flame of exaltation, a feeling of godlike harmony and power. What he had done was something impossible; and he had done it. That was a moment of ecstasy: a moment when he seemed to hold the quicksilver fire of life itself in the palms of his hands. He had broken out of a prison.

Holyoake would bumble about not understanding why he had done it, but just because he had done it, he would not sack him. He had them — Holyoake — Robin — everyone — he had them where he wanted them.

If he wanted them.

In the stables, beside the grey's stall, Robin was standing, making up her lips. He remembered then that she had come through the archway white-faced, and the lipstick slashed across her white face had been like a clown's make-up.

She studied her face in the small square mirror. 'Did you find out what you wanted to know?' she said casually.

She put the mirror and the lipstick back in her bag, then she held out her gloved hand. One of the seams was split.

'You did that on purpose,' he said.

In the next few months Jean saw him quite often — on the race-course, at Tattersalls, at the theatre with Mrs Legge James; and she met him a couple of times in town for lunch. He seemed carefree



enough — full of news about Fennel in Switzerland and looking forward to her return in six months' time, full of the little anecdotes about his father that always seemed like parables. He was doing quite well as an amateur over the sticks, the riding school was flourishing, and he was free of financial worry. But he had not been to Troy for months, and Jean's mother was sure he must be unhappy.

'When he doesn't come to see us it's always because he's unhappy,' she said. 'It's his way of loving us, not to worry us with his troubles. And we haven't seen him for six months.'

'But Mother — he's written.'

'I know. It's not the same.'

Then one morning at breakfast, Matthew Jegon passed a letter across to his wife: a letter from Aubrey, asking if they had seen anything of his son. It seemed that Hugh had just gone out one morning five months ago, and never returned. They had not heard from him at all. Aubrey had written to Holyoake to inquire, but there had been no reply. Hugh was his own master, of course, but naturally they were worried.

Matthew Jegon said, 'Did you know about this, Jean?'

She could only shake her head. But she had an idea she ought to have guessed. Every time she had seen him, he had, in some way that was not quite lying, not quite a young man's posing, tried to make an impression even on her — in a rather lordly, off-hand fashion, as if he had wanted her to believe that he really was about thirty-five years old, and had lived very fully and come out the other side, sophisticated, tolerant and worldly-wise.

She had put that down to Robin's account, suspecting he was having what she was sure he would now call 'a violent affair' with her. She had supposed that he had stayed away from Troy simply because he was ashamed of being so little faithful to Fennel.

Now it seemed so clear.

Her mother was saying, 'You could go over to Sandown, Matt. He's riding today — in the Catterick. "The Captain" in my paper tips his horse to win: Furious — it's at sevens.'

It seemed an odd way of telling her husband not to be too hard on Hugh, and to bring him back to Troy. But that was what it was.

When, in the evening, he came back with her father, Hugh was very chastened — in his eyes the look Jean always thought of as his 'confessional' look, a purged and humble look promising amendment most firmly. He looked convalescent from a nearly mortal sin, and very very young.

During the week-end, he spent a great deal of time drafting a letter to his father. Jean knew his repentant moods of old; but she was appalled at the abject humility of the letter he brought to her to vet. It was full of embarrassing words like 'heartless,' 'selfish'; full of apologies and self-abasement. There was not a word of real explanation. It was, she thought, rather a cruel letter, though Hugh would never see that.

'Prodigal sons seem to run pretty well to form,' she said.

'How do you mean?'

'The way you talk. I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight and am no more worthy to be called thy son. Why do you always have to be so ashamed?'

He only grinned. 'Because I adore roast veal.'

You always had to laugh with Hugh, in the end.

Her mother seemed to have been right. Now that the ice was broken, they saw quite a lot of him. He would appear unannounced, spend a few days, be gay and amusing, and really quite uncommunicative, and disappear until next time. But he came. At least communication was possible.

A few months later, Fennel returned from Switzerland. Jean guessed she was back, several weeks before Hugh finally brought himself to tell her. She met him one crisp December morning in the park, watching the riders in the Row; and within five minutes she guessed. He was content to be young; he could afford even to communicate properly. He had a scheme, of course, but it was a sensible practical plan. He was thinking of taking out a licence as a professional under National Hunt Rules.

'I want to make money quickly. I think I can do that, racing. I'm beginning to get the hang of it. But I can't go on taking time off from Holyoake's.'

'You won't do it, you know. You couldn't bear to be a pro at anything.'

'I might. I don't know, yet. It only means I'll have to resign from the clubs I don't belong to.'

'You're getting very practical.'

'Terribly practical,' he said.

She recognized the tone of voice; knew Fennel was back, and they were together; waited for him to tell. But he did not.

'It goes with the phases of the moon,' he said.

Later, when there was, for some unknown reason, less need to be secretive, she got to know Fennel fairly well. Yet she was never told that they were living together. Fennel was quite open about the facts, though she wore a wedding ring. But Hugh had to be devious, leaving at the same time as Jean left, with slightly emphasized goodbyes to Fennel, planting his arrangements to see Fennel again in his audience's mind, like a bad playwright.

It was silly of him; because they were, in a curiously innocent kind of way, so obviously happy together. It was a happiness of shared fantasy, like children's: fragile and absurd perhaps, a game almost, yet true. She had an idea that that happiness was endangered by secrecy.

She had dinner with them at the flat one night, and when she left he came down to the taxi rank with her. He took her arm, humming a phrase from the Mozart concerto Fennel was practising.

'I love that bit,' he said. 'It's like life — you don't know whether it's tragic or gay, and it doesn't matter. There isn't any morality about it. It's just there.'

She said, 'Why don't you marry her, Hugh?'

He jumped across the great pool of shadow under a tree; stood still. In an impenetrably airy voice he said, 'She wouldn't have me, I shouldn't think.' Then naively: 'I asked her once.'

'Why not ask her again?'

'I shall, probably. On Tuesday week.' He stepped carefully into the exact centre of a paving stone. 'When I'm old enough.' His voice was puzzled, and feeling for flippancy.

At once he was talking nineteen to the dozen, about Fennel's approaching debut at the Queen's Hall, wanting Jean to think he had not said what he had.

She said, 'Don't bother to come any farther, Hugh. It's such a waste of time pretending.'

He looked up, and away swiftly.

'I'll share your taxi down to the station,' he said.

A few weeks later, at a Sunday Concert, Fennel played the last Mozart concerto, with Sir Henry Wood conducting. The critics mentioned the distinction of her phrasing, the delicacy of her tone, the thoughtfulness of her conception. She gave a recital at the Wigmore Hall, played at a Promenade Concert, with the same critical result, though one man complained her tone was thin. Jean, reading inexpertly between the lines, knew Fennel had got off to a bad start. She had failed to dominate.

Partly it was a matter of physique; she simply did not have the stamina to bear the strain of concert-giving. In the end, however, perhaps it was just that an audience terrified her, so that the rocket never quite rose free. One had a sense sometimes of her playing on, by sheer gallantry alone, against the savagery of her own self-criticism mirrored in the audience's eyes; and she lacked the showman's instinct to brazen out her fear.

Hugh seemed to understand. Before and after each concert, he was surprisingly good with her: watchful and thoughtful for her, in a stripped and strangely intimate way, as though he understood her situation and her reactions totally, with his bones. He never fussed. He was not sentimental. His intuition never seemed to fail. He had always been good in a crisis.

Yet Jean wondered. She knew that if she had been in Fennel's place, she would have needed comfort more blunderingly masculine; she would have needed someone to fight the mood, not

understand — someone to slap her bottom and say, 'That's enough of this nonsense, my girl,' and laugh her out of it ...

There were concerts in the provinces; a visit to Lyons, Brussels, and Paris; and then an invitation to join the entourage of a contralto for an American tour. Fennel rang up Jean and asked her to come down and see her off at Southampton. Jean did not want to go but Fennel insisted.

Hugh seemed surprised when she joined them on the platform at Waterloo, and she felt that he thought she was intruding. He was very silent on the way down — inattentive and self-absorbed, hardly remembering to hide his feelings. Something had gone wrong; he did not even bother to be long-suffering.

Then when the *Mauretania* drew away into the gleam and mist of the Solent, and they were walking through long emptying sheds to the train, Hugh said:

'That's that. All done, finish. She's not coming back.'

'What's gone wrong, Hugh?'

'What could have gone wrong?' He was very surprised.

'What are you going to do?'

'Wait for her.'

The remark was typically Hughish: mock-defeat, mock-cynicism, mock-tragedy, mock-feeling, all complete — yet totally sincere about something else. He did not laugh, but laughter was very near.

There was nothing she could say or do. She wanted to get him to come and stay at Troy, but they were all going up to Scotland for August. When they got back, he had moved from his digs, and had left no address. When she rang Holyoake's stables she found he had left there too.





# BOOK THREE

1933-7



1 THEY did not see or hear from him for nearly a year. Then she heard where he was living, and tracked him down.

He greeted her effusively. He had been meaning to come down, meaning to come down, but he had been so awfully tied up.

Interrupting, she asked the direct question:

‘How’ve you been living?’

‘Breathing. In and out. Like you.’ He demonstrated noisily. ‘I sleep. And eat.’

‘Do you owe a lot of money?’

‘Why?’

She had really only been guessing, until she heard that startled, defensive ‘Why’.

‘Hugh. I’ve got nearly three hundred pounds in the bank. I could lend you a hundred.’

‘I can’t take money from you,’ he stammered. He would never forget that she had made the offer, but it was impossible. ‘Anyway, I don’t need any money,’ he said.

But in the end he borrowed a great deal more than a hundred pounds, during the next few months. He never actually asked her to lend him money. That would have been sponging. She had to guess his need and offer help. It was a proof of her understanding and affection when she did, and only that made it possible for him to accept.

There was never much difficulty in guessing. He was always so grimly reticent, so restlessly inattentive, so sudden and inconsequent in his replies to her questions, as if hag-ridden by desperation — whether he needed ten pounds or ten shillings. Even a child could have guessed.

Hating to feel that he thought of her as an easy touch, the next

time it happened she asked when he proposed to pay her back. He reacted with bewildering suddenness.

'Oh God,' he said, 'Oh God. Next week. Yes, next week' — and shut up like a clam.

He came down to Troy a fortnight later; made a thing of getting her alone 'to hear something to her advantage', pulled out a wad of notes, and paid her back.

He had made a note of the exact sums, he said. So had she. The sum he tried to pay her was five pounds more than he had borrowed.

'Where did you get the money?' It slipped out before she could stop herself.

'Robbed a bank, I expect,' he said, and began to talk about something else very quickly.

Slowly, he seemed to slip out of the habit of coming to Troy. Jean heard of him from time to time, from friends, from his father. His father said he was just a rotter: 'He's work-shy.'

She found herself defending him. He was not really lazy. It was just that money never seemed to him a very convincing reason for working. He needed a cause. There were jobs, she knew, at which he would work to the point of exhaustion for no more than a pittance. But they were always the sort of job that people with private incomes took on as a hobby.

In much the same quixotic way, too, he would shoulder all the responsibilities of friendship for a mere acquaintance — a chap he had met in a bar, in the Turkish baths, or on the race-course. The chap only had to be seedy and down-at-heel, Hugh only had to feel that the world was oppressing him — and then he could refuse him nothing.

He would meet these people once or twice, and move into such swift intimacy that they would confide in him; and almost without realizing it, he would offer to help them over some particular stile. He would always keep his word to them, no matter what it cost him in humiliation and trouble. He would take advantage of his friends — pledge his credit — borrow: all quite ruthlessly, for some pathetic

misfit who was down on his luck. He could not fail his acquaintances.

His friends were a different matter. Yet somehow when he failed them it was only because he was trying to have a better character than he could afford. His feelings could never quite support the things he assumed he ought to do; and so it always seemed he had no feelings at all. Then he had to hide away — to begin somewhere else.

When Jean's brother Geoffrey was killed on manœuvres, Hugh was enjoying a brief period of financial stability. He was working for a travel agency — acting as guide, interpreter, secretary and liaison officer to a group of American historians doing field work among the feudal castles in the Quercy. It was the sort of job he could be happy in. It was interesting, it gave him an illusion that he was serving the cause of knowledge, it gave him a chance to use the beautiful French accent he was so proud of. The fact that it was very well paid was merely incidental. But when he heard about Geoffrey he threw it all to the winds, and came straight home to Troy.

It was quite unnecessary. There was nothing he could do. But his unheralded arrival, dusty and tired from two nights' travelling, his tactful and humble affectionateness, had seemed exactly right; exactly what they all needed, especially Jean's mother. She needed a son to fuss and be fussed by; and Hugh was so nearly her son. By claiming the privilege, he had widened the closed and intimate circle of their grief, so that each one of them could be that much freer, that much more honest, that much less stricken. Yet he seemed to feel no particular grief himself.

He stayed with them for three weeks. Then, one morning, as abruptly as he had come, and to Jean quite as inexplicably, he had gone. He had — it seemed to be a habit — hardly bothered to say goodbye.

Long afterwards they learned that it had cost him his job. If he had thought to wait and explain to his historians the reasons why he had to go back to England, they would not have minded. But

he had not. He had needed to drop everything to answer the call. Perhaps it made his feelings for Geoffrey, and for her mother and father, more real, to have made a sacrifice for them. Jean hoped it was that.

One after another, people tried to help him. He watched their efforts with polite interest, seemed disappointed when they failed to penetrate his armour of waking sleep, and then always went and did something so bloody silly that they left him alone. He seemed to prefer that.

About a year after Geoffrey's death, Hugh sent Jean a postcard, and she met him in town. He seemed pleased to see her, anxious to demonstrate an entirely new hand of purposiveness that made him a little stiff and formal; as if he were wearing a new suit. She offered to take him to lunch at the Berkeley. She had just got her allowance.

He said virtuously, 'There's a Lyons just round the corner. It's a waste to eat all that money.'

'I've never known you worry about that before.'

'I'm going to get married.'

He began to tell her what a wonderful girl he was going to marry, and then, as if he thought she must disbelieve him, stopped.

'You won't know her, Jean. They're nobody in particular, her people. I'm not being a snob, but they're just decent, middle-class people. She's a rock. She has character.'

With a sort of despair, Jean realized Hugh was going to turn over a new leaf with his marriage. This one was social as well as moral.

He was fiddling with a fork, drawing what seemed to be a coat-of-arms on the table top.

'I've been living in a make-believe world. With her I shan't, any more. She's awfully real.'

She asked, 'Do I meet her?'

'Do you want to?' he asked.

He really was surprised that she did.

They met for the races at Lingfield. Colonel Harrington, a friend



of Jean's father, had a horse running in a handicap hurdle, and Hugh was to ride. Evelyn wanted to see him ride. Hugh suggested making a party of it, the three of them. Jean drove them down to the course on Saturday morning.

It was always an exhausting business being with Hugh before a race. He was so full of forebodings that it affected the people around him; as though he were taking more than his share of air.

Evelyn spoke sharply to him. She told him not to be so selfish. He looked ill-used, but he stopped at once.

Nobody else had ever been able to do that before. But then nobody had ever bothered.

It was a poor race. Hugh was out in front all the way. He was challenged on the run in, from the last fence, but following instructions, he sat still, and the horse fought off the challenge on its own, to win the race by three lengths.

When he came back to the enclosure, he was in racing clothes still, and greatcoat.

'It wasn't so bad, was it?' Evelyn said, exactly as one would talk to a child after a visit to the dentist.

Then she noticed. She pulled a white cap out of his greatcoat pocket.

'You've changed your colours.'

A note came out of the pocket with it, fluttering to the ground.

'I'm riding in the Welter, for a friend of mine. Their jockey broke his collar-bone in the first race.' To Jean he said, 'It's Furious. He's worth backing for a place.'

Evelyn pointed at the note. Hugh retrieved it, and was putting it in his pocket, when Evelyn held out her hand. He was taken aback, and fluttered a warning glance round the group; but, mutinously obedient, he gave it to her.

Evelyn said, quietly, though to Jean it seemed her voice was alert with something very like hate:

'Who's the old friend who calls you "darling"?'

'Robin Legge James. I've told you about her.'

'Where is she?'

He seemed to disappear behind his eyes: he was not there.

'I don't know,' he said.

Evelyn turned away, with a smile that omitted Hugh. He took a pace after her — looked back at them with a kind of appeal — followed.

'Where are you going, Evelyn?'

He murmured, so that they should not hear. But they heard quite plainly. And Evelyn's answer came clear too:

'To tell that woman you are not going to ride for her.'

'You can't do that, Evelyn.'

Colonel Harrington and his family could move away. Jean had to stay.

Hugh put a hand on Evelyn's arm. 'Please, Evelyn.'

'Leave go of me.'

'But — I said I'd ride. It's too late to back out now. It's only twenty minutes to weighing-out.'

'Then she'll have to find another boy friend to ride, won't she? Someone else's man.'

Her voice was precise, businesslike, and final; and heavy-footed.

'Let me go and tell her myself.' His voice was pleading.

'I'll come with you.'

'No, please not, Evelyn. Please. I'll tell her. Really.'

Evelyn appeared to relent. 'All right, then. But you'd better find her. I'd be back, if I were you.'

But Hugh rode, as Jean knew he would; drifting into defiance through sheer inanity.

As the horse went down to the start, Jean saw him looking for Evelyn in the enclosure. Evelyn turned away towards the gates.

In her situation, Jean thought, she would never have been able to decide what to do.

Evelyn had no doubts at all.

'Goodbye,' she said. 'It's been such a nice afternoon. Thank you.'

Jean let her go. If she wanted to be stupid, she would not stop her. But she needed a good spanking.

Hugh fell at the sixth fence, trying, like a fool, to overtake on the

inside of the turn. He was thrown under the landing horses, and when the race passed him he lay very still.

Jean was unsurprised. That would be Hugh's solution.

The St John Ambulance men were lifting him on to the stretcher when she got there. He looked very white and small. He had one thing to show Evelyn, anyway: a lovely black eye.

The race-course doctor examined him. It was only a slight concussion. In a few minutes he was sitting up, and in half an hour he was ready to go.

'Where's Evelyn?' he said.

'Your friend has left.'

'I know,' he said, characteristically. 'It was my fault.'

'You were pretty weak, weren't you?'

As they headed for town, he sat forward with an air of immense interest, traced round the dial of the revolution counter, prodded morosely at the figure 4,800.

'I needed the lesson.'

'Probably.'

He sat silent, looking absorbed in the traffic passing: a kind of intelligent vacancy in his eyes, as if he were trying to be very social while his life blood seeped away.

'You give me a pain,' she said. 'You're such a fraud. Life's always such a punishment for you. People, too. So what? What have you done to be so punished for? Why you?' She was nearly crying with anger. 'You're too bloody small.'

He said sharply, 'No, no,' and stopped.

'People get fed up with it,' she said.

He said, 'I know,' and was mute for the rest of the journey.

At Hyde Park Corner, he said, 'Will you drop me here?'

'Why not come down to Troy?'

'I've got to face the music. Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. Very small music in the small hours.'

He wiggled his finger by his ear in farewell.

'Just my size,' he said.

★

When Jean had driven away, he bought flowers from a barrow — too many — dozens — of bronze, red and cream carnations.

He turned north like a homing pigeon, towards St John's Wood, where Evelyn lived. But he was only walking, because it was cowardly to be going to her; and he was possessed by a wild fantasy of their wedding day: of waiting for Evelyn at the altar steps, saying 'I will,' marrying her, as he had promised — and then turning away, leaving her at the altar rails, repudiated for ever.

He hated her. He could not remember ever feeling any emotion for her that he could recognize as love. He was sure she did not love him. No one could love who could so miss the point, who could so humiliate anyone for so trivial a reason. Yet — because of that, he needed her. The very fact that she had missed the point was a kind of safety — a proof of a grasp of reality so strong that she did not hesitate to ride roughshod over his feelings when she saw they were not true. Perhaps she had seen through the fake thing that was dangerous to him, and that he could never see for himself.

When he rang Evelyn's door-bell there was no answer. He rang again, keeping his finger on the button until she did come.

'So you've come running back,' she said.

She would not take the flowers.

'I'll throw them away,' he said, and dropped them on the step negligently.

'What'll everyone think, the bell going on and on like that. Haven't you any tact?'

'No,' he said. 'None.'

'Oh come in, I suppose.'

She could take the flowers, he noticed, now that it was clear she was not to be bribed. She plumped them into vases as if they too were to blame.

'I'm waiting,' she said.

'I had to ride, Evelyn. There wasn't anyone else. Bets were on, Mrs Legge James had paid her acceptance. Please, do understand. I just couldn't let everyone down.'

'Couldn't let them down. What about me?' she said furiously.

It sounded very self-centred of her to talk like that. He tried to understand why she was so angry. He felt that if only he could believe, really believe, that she was right to be so angry, he would be taking a huge step into the reality that had always baffled him. But he could not. Her anger only embarrassed him acutely, exactly as if she had made a social gaffe.

'Showing me up in front of everybody,' she said. 'Anyway she's old enough to be your mother, Mrs Legge James.'

'I know. But I haven't seen the woman for years.'

'That doesn't alter the principle — if you had any respect for me.'

It went on and on. He sat very still: a hare in its fur.

The carnations were in a vase on the tallboy. They were arranged in stiff frilly rows like a can-can chorus. She glanced from them to him.

'You won a lot, didn't you? You'd better give it to me to look after.'

She was forgiving him.

He handed over the notes, just as he had stuffed them into his pocket at Lingfield, all mixed up with a bookie's ticket and a race card. In doing that, he was guaranteeing that in future he would cut his coat of dreams according to his cloth, promising that the money would not be used as a medium of wicked fantasy; and in giving him back a pound — for pocket money — she was not only forgiving him, but somehow admitting, too, that she loved him in spite of his so great defects. It was like a pact.

For him, having money was only a mood; being without it another. But for her it was the index of reality. She hoarded it, not for itself — she was not mean — but as a means of self-expression; its use was a language, a subtle and precise language of the unconscious, conveying nuances of character and feeling that she could never express in words.

He was glad Evelyn understood about money, glad she understood that he could not be trusted with it. Yet at the same time he was pitying her — feeling the tenderness one feels for something absurd and small and weak — because money was such a tatty thing

to understand. You had just as much power if you ignored it completely; perhaps more, since that always took people by surprise.

He understood her so well. When he took the pound he looked down quickly as if to hide the disappointment in his eyes; and at once, defensively, she said:

'A pound's enough, isn't it? You know what you are with money.'

Still not looking at her he said, 'It's masses. Of course. Plenty enough.'

But as he had foreseen, she was so afraid of being thought mean, she opened her bag.

'You ought to get some socks. I'll give you another thirty shillings to get some more.'

It was awkward. He needed three pounds.

When she went out to the small communal kitchen to make tea, he opened her bag. His money was neatly packed into a note-case. In the front was a ten shilling note. He pocketed that. It was not stealing. It was his own money. He put the case back, closed the bag.

He could hear her filling the kettle from the tap, and he felt ashamed. It occurred to him that she might know that there was only one ten shilling note there.

He would show her. It was a very funny idea; a kind of test, too. He took one of the pound notes she had given him and put it back exactly where the ten shilling note had been. He heard her coming along the corridor. When she came into the room he turned as if she had startled him.

'Evelyn — I didn't hear you.'

She looked at him curiously; then — of course — went to her bag; opened it. She rifled through the contents for a long time. He sat down as if lazily.

'You've been to my bag,' she said.

She was very white, very composed. But suddenly she had to sit down.

'You don't mean that.'



'There was a ten shilling note here just now. It's gone.' Her voice was forlorn, distant, and yet very decided.

'I am supposed to have taken it?'

'I didn't make the accusation.'

Hugh got up, walked once across the room, stood in the centre of a red square on the carpet. Exactly in the centre.

'Hadn't we better do some finding out?' he said, businesslike. 'How much money did you have before you took — took charge of — mine?'

Evelyn shook her head in almost imperceptible warning. But he had to go on.

'I gave you twenty-nine pounds. You've given me two pounds ten. Leaves twenty-six pounds ten shillings.' He carried the bag over to her; laid it on her lap.

She did not open it.

But then to silence him, she opened it, and counted the notes. There were twenty-seven pound notes.

'Well? There's your ten bob, only it's a pound.'

She did not answer for a long time. Then she said, without belief or disbelief, stating a fact: 'There was a ten shilling note there just now.'

'There can't have been. You must have forgotten something you spent.'

'I don't want to talk about it, Hugh.'

'Then at least apologize.'

'I said we were not going to talk about it.'

'This is something we've got to get straight.'

'Oh, forget it.'

It seemed a pity. It did not help much, to stay silent. It did not change the subject, really.

When he left she kissed him grudgingly, as if pretending he was not a thief; and he knew, like a new discovery, that he was very very fond of her — just because in some complicated and hidden way she had called his bluff. He might not love her; but he was bound to her more closely than to anyone ever before, so closely

that he could never break the bond; and one day he would learn to love her, just because she was so good — so rock-like.

He had met her first, two years after Fennel sailed for America.

That day he had woken in a panic, as if from a nightmare; but the nightmare was still going on inside his mind when he was awake. Today, before twelve o'clock midnight, he had to return the camera he had borrowed from Brian MacDermot. It was in pawn, and he just did not have the money to get it out. Five pounds eleven shillings. They called it stealing 'while bailee', and you could get a month in prison for it.

With luck and a little fast talking he might be able to put off the reckoning until the next day. He would do that. But it still would not be any good. He still could not think where he could raise five pounds eleven shillings even by tomorrow.

What a fool he had been to do it, then not to have thought of how to get the money before it was too late. Fool, fool. Triple bloody fool. He got up at once, dressed hastily. He must get out. Walking, he might get an idea where to raise five pounds eleven.

It was just after dawn when he slipped out into the grey, hollow street. He went City-wards, walking fast, thinking of people he could borrow the money from, rehearsing little plausible casually dramatic approaches to the most unlikely people. Five pounds fifteen, call it.

Jean? He could never borrow from her again. Besides, she was away.

His father? He had not seen him for a year. Perhaps if he told the truth his father would forgive him and give him the money.

Brian MacDermot? It would be funny to borrow the money from Brian, to return his own camera. If he said ... 'Only five pounds eleven ...'

Then suddenly — it must have been about nine o'clock, there were lots of people in the streets going to their offices — he remembered the insurance policy. If you had an insurance policy a bank would give you an overdraft. He had a life policy for five hundred

pounds. He had taken it out three years before — in case he was killed racing. He had been proud of it then. He had felt it showed a real sense of responsibility and thoughtfulness for Fennel.

He hailed a taxi. He had only a few shillings in the world, but this was a matter of life and death. He reached his bank just as it was opening for the day.

The manager saw him, almost immediately. He asked him for an overdraft of twenty-five pounds. When the manager told him it was impossible, he smiled — a dry smile, as at an irritating trivial interruption in a busy day — and said it did not matter. The manager wanted to see the policy, but he had not wasted time going back to his digs to get it. It had all been too urgent.

'It wasn't very urgent. I thought I'd come and spy out the land first,' he said.

'Because if you're in a jam for money, and you can't get someone to guarantee an overdraft, you could surrender the policy.'

'Surrender?'

'Sell it back to them for the residual value of the premiums.'

'Is that wise?' That sounded very businesslike.

The manager said, 'It's your best way if you've got to raise the wind in a hurry.'

'I shan't bother. I might be glad of it later.'

'Perhaps you're wise.'

When he got outside it was like stepping into sunlight. It was as if he had the money in his pocket already. Bank managers never misled people over things like that.

Never put off to tomorrow what you can do today; that was morality. Because it was so good for his character he spent his last half-crown on a taxi to the head offices of the insurance company.

When he got there he had to wait for a long time in a number of different places. Finally he was taken along to a small office where a girl sat behind a desk.

'I'm afraid the manager is out,' Evelyn said. 'I'm his secretary. About this query of yours.'

Poker-faced, he learned that the surrender value of his policy

was only twenty-three pounds, and that it would be at least three weeks before he could touch the money.

He did it quite perfectly. 'What a bore. It'll just have to wait till I get back.'

He grinned.

'I'm off to France tomorrow for a few weeks.'

She said, 'Paris?' and he knew she was thinking of the *Folies Bergère*.

She was alone in her tiny office. He could see her boss's office through the turbid glass behind her desk: a green shade for the desk light, a blurred bronze-green outline of a filing cabinet, a hat hanging on a peg, and a deserted, vaguely submarine landscape.

'No,' he said. 'The Vendée.'

'Where's that?'

Idly, without any particular reason that he could think of, he found himself talking about France. France was so much the country of his dreams that in talking about it he was really talking about himself.

'I expect you speak French awfully well?' she said.

He nodded, and she asked — he thought wistfully — if he was going on business. He said, 'No. Just a sort of visit,' and only to please her, not to show off, he invented an eccentric relative in Pouzages. He was, it seemed, a very wise old man, who painted — badly — and fished for eels and was contented.

'He drinks rather a lot,' he said.

'If you could spare the time, I might be able to rush everything through. So you could have the money tomorrow before you go.'

He was bored then. Bored not so much by his own charm as by the sameness of the situations he had to use it in, the sameness of the responses it evoked. It seemed — disgusting; a trap, from which he could never escape.

'It's not worth your bothering,' he said. 'It really does not matter.'

And he meant it. It would punish him to have to wait.

But in the end he agreed. He hedged, for a time, but he agreed. Evelyn piloted him through the business of filling up forms, and

when he had finished she told him to come back in about two hours' time to fill up another. He had to go back to the office three times in all, and hang about waiting for signatures and an interview.

Just to get twenty-three pounds. It was embarrassing.

At five o'clock she told him that she had got the cheque drawn. It only needed her boss's signature. It would be ready for him first thing in the morning. If he called for it five minutes after the office opened it would be waiting for him.

She really had been very kind; and he was grateful, though in a lordly way that felt like being sorry for her. She was exhausted after making such a personal effort to get the money for him quickly. He wondered why she had done it. He supposed he must have cut rather a romantic figure, with his aristocratic disdain for the money she had worked so hard to get him.

Out of pity, he invited her for a drink. She accepted eagerly, as if it was an adventure, and he took her to the Berkeley. It seemed the sort of place, and he could cash a cheque there. With the money coming in in the morning it would be safe enough.

It was while he was writing the cheque that she saw the pawn ticket for Brian's camera. Stupidly he had left his wallet open on the table, and there was the ticket, sticking out of the pocket.

He was afraid she would know he had been lying about going to France, so he took the pawn ticket out of the wallet and brandished it.

'My ticket to France,' he said cheerfully. 'Fourth class. Very hard, with wooden backs to the seats.'

She did not smile. Perhaps she thought pawning things was disreputable.

'Now I shall go second — in affluence, thanks to you.'

He waved the pink pawn ticket under her eyes like a train ticket. 'Do you clip it now, or on the train?' he babbled.

'Oh, ssh! All these people. They're looking at you.'

She was embarrassed. And he knew he had convinced her.

The drinks came. They talked. She was looking for a place to

spend her summer fortnight. Last year she had been to Blackenberghe. She and a girl friend, with a party. They had not enjoyed it much. He seemed to know about France. Where was a good place to go?

'Somewhere cheap and cheerful,' she said. 'Somewhere gay, with sun, and little tables with parasols. Different.'

She sat up very straight at the table, and she looked so eager to learn that he felt sorry for her again.

'What about this place La Vendée?' she said.

He was wondering how to put it, that the Vendée was a district, not a place, so that she would not be embarrassed at making a mistake, when he heard Brian MacDermot's voice across the room.

'Hullo, there's young Hugh.'

He did not think fast enough. If he had got up and gone over to where Brian was sitting she would not have heard. But he was so taken aback that he just did not think of it until it was too late.

Brian came over; said he wouldn't have a drink, he was in a hurry; he only wanted to tell Hugh to buck up and return his camera, that was all. And with that he was gone.

Hugh said, 'Damn. That's a nuisance. I wanted to take it with me to France. Mine being in pawn. As you know.'

'What a mean trick. To pawn his camera. It's despicable.'

'I didn't pawn his camera.'

'Of course you did.'

'I pawned my own camera. Don't you see? That's why I borrowed Brian's.'

'Don't lie to me,' she said.

He thought, she does not mind the lie, only its being to her. Surely the decent thing to do would have been to accept the lie at its face value. To insist on the truth was to impose a relationship.

'Give me that ticket, please,' she said.

It was a bloody silly thing to do, but he took the pink ticket from his wallet and put it on the table between them. She snatched it up at once, so that the waiter hovering near would not see it.

'Haven't you any self-respect?'



It was really quite funny. A moment ago, he had made the most binding decision of his life; and all she could say was: 'Pas devant les domestiques.' That is, she would have said it, if she could have spoken French.

For two years — was it really only since Fennel sailed for America, or had he been like it all his life? — he had been drifting, like a sleep-walker. It had been as though some person buried deep in a kind of impenetrable silence inside him had decided just not to bother; not to bother with anything, even the ordinary precautions of self-preservation. He had stayed alive from day to day, but always by a kind of dazzling evasion, a trick of patter; so that even when what he did was not technically dishonest, he was watchful and tense as if it were.

Lately he had reached the stage of being able to relax only with strangers. He avoided his friends — because they might guess. And now someone had seen the trick performed, and seen through it. That made an intimacy that he could never escape, and he was profoundly grateful. It was like a miracle.

If he was going to make a fresh start he must tell her everything. If she knew everything and still bothered, he would never have to lie again; and he would be free.

He never managed to make that great act of humiliation. Evelyn was too practical — the word that came to his mind was — 'limited' — to be interested in anything but the facts. She pinned him down with questions of place and time, badgering him as if he were a hostile witness, until he almost shouted the answers like insults. All the confession he could achieve was a statement of accounts. That was frightening enough; he owed so much more than he had ever thought to remember before.

To make any kind of sense of the facts, he had to tell her about Fennel — and that blurred the picture too, though he did not know why. After he had told her that, she stopped questioning him about Brian's camera — as if that was the explanation. When she did not question him he could tell her so much more — and the more he told her, the safer.

When he left her later in the evening, he had bound himself to a new ascetic rule. In future, Evelyn would look after his money for him, doling out enough for his everyday expenses. She was going to look round for a proper job for him.

Next day he went down to see Brian and return the camera. He was nervous; it seemed impossible that Brian should not know about pawning it. It was good for his character to face it, and oddly stimulating. But Brian was affable, cursing him amiably for not having come to see him. Hugh said — and the confession made him feel virtuous — that he had been out of circulation for a bit.

Since he was there, Brian had a ride for him.

Two days later, riding Brian's fast horse Judas that could never quite stay three miles, exactly to stable instructions, Hugh managed so to set the pace as to unsettle the favourite and enable Brian's other horse in the race, Bardin, to slip through on the rails a furlong before the finish, and win against the book. Hugh had a fiver on Bardin, and came home the richer by one hundred and eighty pounds. He gave Evelyn one hundred and seventy.

With the money, and under Evelyn's supervision, he paid a lot of debts. He was almost solvent. He supposed he was glad. Evelyn said it was getting back his self-respect; and perhaps it was. He felt exhilarated at the idea, in a sharply focused way that seemed vaguely over-confident — a crook's feeling of immunity.

He knew, though, really, that nothing had changed. He had always had one absolute certainty even in the very worst times: if he really put his mind to it he could always pick up any money he needed. Luck. The Midas Touch. He was just that sort of chap. But he had never bothered. He had not cared enough to bother. And now he had a feeling that if only he had gone on not bothering for just a little longer — if only he had had the guts to let the crash come — he would have found the important thing: the thing that would make sense of life, even of the not caring; and that would have been the thing that would have taught him how to care.

But he had not had the guts.

He felt nostalgic for the days when he had had the guts.

One evening they were sitting in Evelyn's little room, and she was cooking bacon and eggs on the gas ring. She looked up from the pan as she slid the eggs on to the plate — so expertly: she was never less than expert.

'You're even putting on weight,' she said. 'It's from not having the worries of debts and things round your neck. All those lies ...'

Voice uninflected, to let her make what she liked of it, he said: 'I don't expect so. Just eating. It helps. I was eating a little infrequently.'

'You could have worked.'

But she cracked another egg on the edge of the pan. When she gave it to him he said, 'Camel.'

'Camel? I don't get you.'

'Fat in the hump. Ready for next time.'

She was angry then. At the bad omen? — at the weakness? Did it matter? He wished he had not told her anything of starving. It was a fact, but it was not true. It gave such an impression of hurt withdrawal. But his withdrawal had been only from his friends, only from himself. Strangers, he had forced himself on; spent hours with them; spent money on drinks for them, that he should have spent on food and rent. He had kept a stiff upper lip in the only way he knew.

He wished he had never told Evelyn about Fennel. He said something about her now, while Evelyn was making coffee.

She said, 'I'd like to see anyone knock all the stuffing out of me like that.'

He said, 'Did she?'

Evelyn thought his moral breakdown was due to his having been crossed in love. She could see it all from outside. He hoped she was right. But it would always seem as if she was making excuses for him.

Fennel had not wanted to go to America, not really wanted to go. She had been scared. They had never discussed it; but she had

put off signing the contract for a thousand and one reasons, delaying so long that finally the concert agent had delivered an ultimatum: either she signed forthwith, or he would find someone else to take her place.

Hugh had been at pains to stand aside; to avoid influencing her by word or sign; to show that his love was great enough to let her choose freely without thought of any pain to him. That was the unselfish thing to do. He had done it. And all the time he had had an uneasy feeling of doing something two-faced, of acting a part. Then, almost unexpectedly, she was packing, and everything had changed. Watching her, he knew there had been some other decision. Going to America was just a polite way of saying it.

He said, quite lightly, 'It's a pity about me, isn't it? Being such a reasonable chap?'

'Are you?' Head over trunk, voice cool.

'I hoped you'd noticed. I wish I weren't.'

'Why?' She spread tissue paper in the tray of the trunk. It whispered as she laid a dress on it.

'If I weren't, I'd say "Here's where we stop. Either me or a career. Me or America. Choose." Wouldn't I?'

She said — 'Would you?' — took out the dress, refolded it to get the pleats really flat.

'You'd only hate me if I did,' he said.

'Would I?' She rolled stockings to fit in empty corners of the trunk. 'Who knows? I don't. You don't. Because you've never tried.' She stretched across the trunk for a stocking that had got away. 'Why haven't you tried?'

'Because I love you. That's the only reason. You must know that.'

Paper rustled. Negligently, almost as if she was just keeping the conversation going, she said, 'You don't do much because of it, do you?' The tray stuck as she put it into the trunk. It would not go in or come out. She shook it, but it was jammed.

He got down on the floor beside her to help. When he had fixed it he put his arm round her.

'More than most,' he said. 'Really.'

Without moving away, she had gone. She lifted his hand from her shoulder, hid her escape by holding it as if she were going to tell his fortune. She traced across the lines of heart and head with a soft flexible forefinger.

'So little,' she said. 'So very little. Poor Hugh.'

And the gesture that had been so intimate was emptied of all tenderness except a chance-met friendliness. Like a pat on a dog's head.

Something irrevocable had been said, though he could not believe it. Dull-wittedly, he tried to make the words unsaid.

'If I didn't love you, could we have been so happy?'

'Have we been happy?'

She played with his fingers, folding them over, as if she were playing with a baby's fist.

'When you're there,' she said. 'In your own funny way. When you're there.'

She stared at him.

'But you're never there.'

She got up, turning and rising in one wide graceful movement, to stand at the window. She pulled the curtains, looked at her hands grasping the fringes; turned to face him.

'You said about horses once, Hugh — I've never forgotten — "Look after them as if they were worth a thousand pounds. Ride them as if they were worth half a crown," you said ... That's love, Hugh ... You do it with horses ...'

Down in the basement someone shovelled coal, and stopped. The shovel clanged on the floor.

'You do it with people — at first. When it's all new. When you come back to them after something they've had to forgive you for: you do it then. But then it all dies away. It's up to them. They have to do it all — all the time.'

She leant back into the window space, against the curtains. Shadows rushed up from the floor around her, leaving her face pale in the light. The curtain rings chuckled as they shifted with her weight.

'Hugh. I'm not coming back.'

There was a silence like a missed heart-beat.

Always before, by accepting, by waiting, he could bring her back. But always before he had had a credit balance. He could call upon her love, use it to hold her, use it as his own. Now he was powerless. Because she did not love him.

'Why?'

He was startled how dispassionate his voice sounded.

'It's like being in love with a man in a mirror. I can see his eyes looking out of the mirror into mine, gentle and rather sad. But when I look round to touch him, he's not looking at me. His face is turned away. He's looking into the mirror.'

She stepped out of the shadows. 'I live outside. I've got to live outside.'

The strangest thing was that she had convinced him. He was agreeing with her, even though he was stunned and bewildered.

He said, 'I can't get out, Fennel. I've tried.'

She walked away across the room. At the time, it seemed terribly, needlessly cruel.

'I know,' she said.

'Fennel.'

He sat, frozen, immobile, isolated.

'If you'd really wanted me, I'd have stayed. But you don't. Not enough to put it all to the test. I might have hated you.'

Her face was white and small with decision, and she went on quickly:

'Darling, after you're over the first shock, you'll be glad. I think you'll have a wonderful sense of freedom; a tremendous feeling of starting again; because you won't have to pretend any longer — to yourself.'

He said, very quietly and levelly, 'I shall always love you. You don't have to believe it. But if you ever want me, I shall come. I shall wait for you.'

Then he said, 'You can always get hold of me through Uncle Matt.'



He wrote down the address. The practical detail made it true.

She began to cry.

Later — they had both been crying — he took her in his arms to comfort her.

They kissed. Then suddenly she tensed, pushing him away.

'No. No, please. No.'

He knew it was up to him. He held the future in his own hands, at the price of a moment's roughness. But, without quite knowing why, feeling that it was unfair to take advantage, he obeyed, soothing her with gentle words; and the moment slipped away.

It was not until he stood on the quayside at Southampton with Jean, watching Fennel go away from him for ever, that he realized that for one moment the chance had been offered him, to break out of his mirror — and he had let it go by default.

As the putty-coloured bubbles of the ship's wake lapped the quayside, he discovered that Fennel was right. For the first time for years he was free — and he was glad.

And then he was ashamed.

He had never been so ashamed before.

2 EVELYN found him a job with a finance house in the City. She got him an introduction from the chairman of her company, and packed him off to keep the appointment she had arranged.

Leadbetter's were small, but sound. Her company used them as agents for their more speculative investments, of the sort that the larger finance houses would not touch: film finance, building a dog-racing track, speculative building — that kind of thing.

From the moment he entered the office, and Mr Leadbetter smiled at him, Hugh knew the job was his, and was confident and at his best.

Mr Leadbetter was unprepossessing to the point where Hugh

felt it was snobbish to be aware of it, as if a lion were to feel superior to a toad because it was not a mammal. He exuded an aura of maternal permissiveness; an invitation to be smart, and dashing, like a favourite son.

He had the face of an elderly carp set on the pudgy sloping shoulders of a soapstone Buddha. His hands were broad and thick-fingered, damp and soft as with dropsy. His little legs twinkled in their striped trousers as if he were moving across a circus ring. There were no eyebrows at all; and the cigar-coloured eyes were too small, but looked out with such alertness, with such amoral and tolerant amusedness, that, almost in a look, intimacy was established.

He asked about Hugh's background; chuckled silently when Hugh told him about Uncle Matt being an M.F.H.; seemed vaguely impressed when he learned that he was of the same family as the Maunt of Best & Maunt, paint manufacturers; and winked when Hugh said he knew nothing about the Stock Exchange, or indeed about any kind of business.

'It's only necessary to know one thing to be a success,' Mr Leadbetter said, his voice amused. 'Know yourself. Know yourself, and you understand reality.' Then he whispered: 'What is reality?' — as if it were a family joke.

'What you can get away with,' Hugh ventured. It seemed the sort of thing; and at the time it had a ring of truth.

'Ooh,' said Mr Leadbetter, 'we must never say that. It would never do. That would shock people.'

Mr Leadbetter seemed delighted. He theorized about success. It was necessary to understand that money had absolutely no value at all, not a penny; not a golden sovereign. Like the ether for wireless waves, or the lycopodium powder that made such entrancing patterns on a diaphragm when a tuning-fork was struck near by, money was a medium to transmit a wave motion; and the wave motion was the sum of all the forces operating on humanity — hunger and want, lust, envy, malice, and all uncharitableness, the state of the weather and the crops, the soul of man itself. One

need only tune oneself in exactly to the wave-length, to feel the wave motion and be able to use it for one's own purpose, how and as one wanted. That was success.

'You,' said Mr Leadbetter, 'have the Midas Touch. I sensed it as soon as you came into the room. I can nearly always tell. You think you are lucky — things come easily — perhaps you have hunches that come off. I call it being free of self-illusions.'

It seemed very superficial and immoral, and he was like that. But he had promised Evelyn he would not be.

The thing that really decided him to take the job was the smallness of the salary. Mr Leadbetter offered a tiny salary, a miniscule expense allowance, and half commission. If, as Hugh suspected, he should be unable to earn much in the way of half commission, it would prove something.

He paid the first month's very tiny cheque into his own bank, feeling it was time to re-establish his independence; and that evening he suggested a celebration — dinner and theatre. Evelyn asked crudely what there was to celebrate in a pay-cheque that would not keep him for the coming month.

Instead of going out they ate scrambled eggs cooked over her gas ring in her room, just like every other night; and he noticed that no matter what he did or said, he was getting on her nerves. When she was furious over one thing, she found fault with everything. Her anger was always total. He wished he understood.

'What's wrong? What have I done wrong?' he asked.

'If you don't know — it's no good.'

She would not talk about it, she said. But she could not talk about anything else. Then she was near to tears. He tried to comfort her, to find out what was wrong.

'I'd looked forward to it. Having your first cheque to look after; planning what you should do with it. After all I've done for you, it wasn't much to ask. Now you've spoiled everything.'

But surely she wanted him to stand on his own feet? He could not be always going to her for small sums.

'I'm all right to help you get on your feet when you're down. Now you're all right you'll be off, I suppose.'

She was so woebegone, he felt he had failed her seriously — though he had not the least idea how; and that seemed mad — wicked and mad.

'But Evelyn, I'll give it to you. Look, I'll write you the cheque now.'

'I wouldn't take it. Don't think I want your money, it's only the principle. You promised. Besides, it's so heartless.'

He could not understand. He put his arms round her and she struggled against him and he had to hold her tight.

'You're being so silly,' he said. 'I'm not buzzing off — or anything. In fact — I'm asking you to marry me ...'

She relaxed a little, not completely, and for the space of one moment's wild escape, he thought she was going to say no.

She moved away from him, just out of range of physical contact, waited with forlorn dignity while she blinked away the tears; said:

'You don't have to say that, you know.'

So there would be no reprieve.

'I do.'

'You'll have to get some money first,' she said.

They bought a ring a few weeks later. Hugh met Brian and backed his tip for a place in a race at Cheltenham, and won thirty pounds.

Evelyn was angry he should have made money so easily, and, as it were, without her permission. She would not hear of him blueing it all on a ring, as he wanted to. It would give her no pleasure. They bought a cheap ring and put the rest of the money towards buying a vacuum cleaner. They did not seem to see eye-to-eye on very much.

Sometimes he wondered why she was marrying him. She never used an endearment, never said a word of love to him. She endured his love-making kindly but without grace, and without surrender. It was better like that, he told himself. Like that, always holding each other at arm's length, there would be respect between them.

Respect was as enduring, honest, and good, as Evelyn herself. It was one of the things he did not know about. He must learn to value it, to respect himself and her.

He took her down to Blackheath to meet Aunt Hilda and his father. When he telephoned Hilda he could hear her pleasure and relief; could sense her decision to be gentle, to keep bygones bygones; and her little hurried postscript, 'We'll have your father here too, Hugh, to welcome you home,' filled him with a kind of holy contrition. They were so good to him.

Evelyn was a success. Hilda and Aubrey seemed to know that in some way she was responsible for bringing Hugh back to them, and they joked with her about it a little, though with careful playfulness so that Hugh should not feel hurt by their reproaches.

After tea, Aubrey took her off to see his pictures. For as long as Hugh could remember, his father had never willingly shown anyone round his studio; and he was touched when, looking first at him, he suggested it. He knew that that look marked Aubrey's wish to show him honour in front of Evelyn. When the door closed behind them and he was alone with Hilda, he found himself gushing, though he only wanted to repay their affection in kind.

'You do like her, Aunt Hilda?' His voice was eager as a school-boy's.

Hilda said, 'I must say she seems a very sensible girl. Down to earth and straightforward.'

High praise.

'She's got character, Auntie.'

Hilda glanced at him curiously, startled by the expected, just as when he was small she caught him showing off. Her strong hands folded in a reproof, and she said, 'Whoever you choose to share your life, I'm sure we shall love, Hugh. With your background, you see, we shall always know you have chosen someone good and true.'

The joke of it was, he had said nothing about marrying Evelyn, to her, or even to his father.

At the door, when they left, Aubrey thanked Evelyn for bringing his son to see him — gravely as if they shared a secret.

‘You must come down again, young woman,’ he said. ‘Bring him with you; we like to see him sometimes. He doesn’t come much on his own.’ He joked heavily: ‘You must be a good influence.’

On the way back, Evelyn insisted on talking about his father. He was so good and kind; distinguished, too. Not a bit as Hugh had described him.

‘You know where you are with him,’ she said.

‘I don’t,’ said Hugh gloomily. ‘I never have.’

She resented that. She added, ‘If you were as good a man as he, you’d have nothing to worry about.’

He agreed, still gloomy and taciturn.

She asked, ‘Why did you and he fall out?’

‘We haven’t.’

‘There must be some reason why you didn’t go back to him when you — when you were so broke.’

He said slowly, ‘You can’t sponge on people.’

Evelyn thought they should not get married until he had saved some money by way of capital. She thought two hundred pounds was a suitable sum. It seemed very suitable; and very impossible. Hugh agreed enthusiastically. Each month he handed over his cheque to her, and put it out of his mind. But quite soon he found he was doing well enough to make it rather exciting to go without things just to make the total grow quicker. Just the same, when it took only five months they were both a little startled.

Evelyn was so pleased. It was as if at last she trusted him; and that was rather alarming. He pointed out quickly that he had done nothing remotely resembling a day’s work to earn the money. They must not build too much on the last few months. He happened to be a pet of Leadbetter’s, and the old man had put him in the way of a couple of deals. It was only a flash in the pan.

She said nothing for a while, and he felt a little ashamed because he had spoiled her delight.



'Maybe it will be all right,' he said. 'I've only got to be ingratiating to get on. You know me; ingratiating as a son at a death-bed. It ought to be a snip.'

'I should have thought it was better than borrowing, pawning things, and owing bills,' she said, and changed the subject.

The day before the wedding Evelyn told him that she had decided to keep on her job at the office.

'I'm not one to sit about at home doing nothing,' she added — but persuasively, as if she wanted his permission.

He was oddly taken aback, not knowing quite what to feel or to say. He knew she was telling him that she did not trust him to provide for her. He supposed he ought to feel humiliated; but he did not mind at all.

'If you like,' he said. 'Start as we mean to go on.'

She had a sharper ear than he had allowed for. She flared into anger like panic.

'If you're prepared to live like a pauper, I'm not,' she said bitterly. 'You won't catch me thieving because I'm too proud to work.'

There would always be too new a skin between them. It was his fault, and it was good of Evelyn to remind him.

The percolator was bubbling — spilling. Helpful perhaps to take it off the gas ring?

'I'm quite capable of taking a coffee-pot off a gas ring for myself,' she snapped.

'Collapse of stout party,' he said.

It will always be like this. Anger like panic; anger that is her only antidote for panic; panic that paralyses me completely.

It all seemed very hopeless. But still, a small practical voice insisted: As long as she is angry, you will know that she loves you.

He believed it was the very first time in his life he had ever consciously understood anyone else's deeper motives. He had only to watch and listen — like a naturalist in a hide. If he was properly hidden, from himself as well as from her, if the inner noise of self was silenced, if he concentrated only on the evidence, the rhythm of events — he would be able to decipher the code; and

understanding her, he would understand reality too. Perhaps he really had reformed.

They settled down in a tiny flat in Emperor's Gate. It was a bit like living in a railway coach. There was a corridor where two people could just pass; a slot for a bedroom, smaller slots for bathroom and kitchen. Evelyn was entranced with it, it was so small. For Hugh, its only saving grace was an unexpectedly large living-room with a balcony overlooking the street, and an amusing vista of porticoes running off in perspective.

They painted the place themselves, in the crisp, definite colours that Evelyn felt were gay; laid the carpets, scrubbed and cleaned. Evelyn was like a person possessed; she would have worked all night, if necessary, to get the place exactly as she wanted it. There was only one possible place for everything, and that had to be found — as if it was a sort of magic. It was very exhausting; but she had a talent for organizing. In four days it was all done.

Hugh suggested a house-warming party.

It would be rather fun, she thought. 'But not yet. Let's enjoy it a bit.'

They never did have a party. There always seemed to be some reason why they should not. She was tired after the office ... she could not afford it.

They had been married about three months when Hugh suggested having Brian and his wife to dinner. The steeplechasing season would be starting soon, and it was a good idea to keep in with the trainers one knew.

But she said, 'It's just not convenient to have strangers in a place like this. It's too small.'

'Brian wouldn't notice if we ate off the floor.'

The needles were slid firmly into her knitting. The ball of wool was placed on top of the work. The whole was wrapped carefully in the white napkin that kept it clean.

'After what you did to him?'

She got up, straightened the chair cushion, went to the door.

'I should have thought you'd have more respect than to ask. For me — even if you haven't any for yourself.'

He had learned enough not to answer. It wasn't that it was Brian; it would have been the same if it had been anybody else. She was afraid. Not of his friends, but of his response to them; of the resonances they evoked in him. As though he were a reformed alcoholic, and she dreaded the first drink that might reawaken his craving. She had to keep him from his friends.

She was so afraid. He wondered if perhaps she did not really feel safer, just because he was unsatisfactory. He served as a focus for the other, deeper fears; he was a face and a body to accept the penances that might forestall the vengeance of ... the fates? ... or life itself?

She called, 'Hugh, I've put the kettle on for tea.'

'Yes, darling.'

'I'm in bed.'

That makes tonight the same as every night. Every night exactly the same is safety. Life terrifies her, he thought patronizingly, and a little snobbishly.

'Don't make it too strong,' she said.

And suddenly it was funny. The resentment had gone, and his mind was alert again. For a moment he had the illusion of understanding. All her rigid conventions of right and wrong, her puritan taboos, her unforgivingness, her refusal to compromise, even her tidiness, were only rather pathetic sea-walls against the erosion of loneliness. She was a primitive, living in a ghost-haunted forest. To be safe from the ghosts' resentment one must keep the taboos they imposed. If the taboos were broken, retribution followed. The ghost-driven machine kept exact accounts; every slip had to be paid for, even those made by other people. Even to be kind to the sacrilegious was dangerous, it was safest to forestall the reckoning by anger, by outspoken condemnation. The unknown frightened her; but anything that actually happened, she always faced — anything that had a real shape; anything she could *fight*.

He must not mind when she was angry, because it helped her.

★

Three weeks later, Uncle Matt told Hugh that he was going to put Moonraker into training for the Grand National, and offered him the ride.

'We'll put him in for Cheltenham and the Craven Cup for good measure,' he said, 'and give him a race locally about Christmas, as a pipe-opener.'

He got up from his desk, waving a cheque, to dry it.

'By way of a belated wedding present, old chap.'

He held it out to Hugh. It was for a hundred pounds.

'I don't know how to thank you, Uncle ...'

'Then don't bother. Suppose we finish our drinks and go and tell the womenfolk.'

In the drawing-room, Aunt Bess, with expert fingers, was admiring Evelyn's knitting laid out on her lap. Between them, lying open on the settee, was the old French book of needlework and embroidery that as children they had called 'The stitch in time'. And Hugh had been worried that they would not get on!

Matthew Jegon made his announcement, and moved towards the bell-pull.

'Calls for a drink, I think,' he said.

Hugh watched Evelyn smooth the open needlework book firmly with both thumbs; and smooth again; and his heart sank. Aunt Bess's eye, bland and interrogative, swept past her averted head. Aunt Bess said hastily:

'It's rather late for drinks, Matt, don't you think?'

Matthew Jegon studied the bell-pull. 'This contraption's getting very worn, Bess,' he said.

Evelyn said, loud, for everyone to hear: 'But you must know you can't do it, Hugh.'

Very softly, murmuring the words into her mind: 'Yes, Evelyn. Yes.'

'But you can't, Hugh. You can't give up the time. You've got a job to do.'

'C. C.'ll be tickled pink. He'll jump at the publicity.'

'Are you quite mad? What do we live on while you're training

and riding?' She began to speak over his head, appealing to Matthew Jekon, one grown-up to another. 'He should have told you, Uncle Matt. The truth is we've only got what he earns, and he gets paid by results. He just won't have the time.'

Matthew Jekon hovered by the bell-pull, balancing on the balls of his feet.

'Dunno. You meet a lot of people racing. Jorrocks took his orders for tea in the hunting field, you know.'

'Long-term, Evelyn, it would pay,' Hugh attempted. 'I could talk to C. C. about the money.' He tried hard to keep his voice judicious and friendly. 'Besides,' he added, knowing it was a mistake, 'we've saved quite a bit.'

Evelyn said, 'I was talking to Uncle Matt, Hugh.'

She went on, 'Hugh always makes it sound so grand, as if he's earning thousands. But he isn't. It's not as if we had a private income. I have to go to work to make ends meet; and put by a little for if one of us is sick.' The last words sounded faintly triumphant.

'That's not true —' Hugh began, but Aunt Bess rescued him, cutting in before he was committed: 'I've always wondered what a public income is. There must be one,' and Hugh said something silly about its being the income from a bar. Then he remembered to show Evelyn the cheque, and the subject was dropped. But for the rest of the evening, Evelyn never once spoke directly to him.

Later, alone in the bedroom with her, he had to explore the silence. With simple goodwill he tried.

'Nice of Uncle Matt to do that about the National.'

'Was it?'

'I thought so.'

Silence. A silence that was quite unfair, and not to be borne.

'Here,' he babbled, 'where's that cheque? I'll endorse it so that you can pay it into the bank.'

'It's in my bag. It'll be there tomorrow. I don't go running off with other people's money.'

Totally ingratiating he said: 'Perhaps you were right about the money. I ought to have thought. But love will find a way. C. C. will do

something. Evelyn, it won't take any time away from work. Apart from the four days' racing, I'll only have to put in a couple of hours a week. On Saturdays, if you like. I shan't train Moonraker myself.'

'If it won't take any time, there's nothing to see Leadbetter about, is there?' she said.

'That's settled, then.'

'You're going to ride?'

'But Evelyn, why not?'

'The fact I don't want you to, doesn't mean anything. That'll be something I've learned, anyway. I shan't forget that.'

'But why don't you want me to, Evelyn? Surely I can have something I want out of life?'

'What happens if you are killed?'

She spoke so passionately he was ashamed. He sat down on the bed beside her, and there were tears in his eyes, because she loved him, and was afraid for him, and he had been too selfish to realize.

'But I shan't be, darling. Really, I never am. Only the good die young.' He took her hand to fondle it; comfort it.

'Oh, don't start maudling.'

'You don't give me much chance, do you?'

He stood up, trying hard to keep his tone sweet and reasonable; factual.

'Statistically, lying in bed's a sight more fatal than riding in the National.'

'Oh, don't lecture.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Standing there leaning on your feet, lecturing. You must be in love with the sound of your voice.'

'I was trying to cheer you up.'

'What happens to me if you're killed?'

The words were out. She was in tears; destroying, clumsy tears.

'Other women have husbands who provide for them before they go risking their necks. What have I got to live on if you were killed? All alone, no money, and no one to turn to. Why should you care? You'd be all right. You'd be dead.'



She had turned her back to him. She was lying on her side on the bed, legs drawn up, as if coiled in a womb of misery. He crouched down beside her awkwardly, resting his head on the pillow beside hers, circling her with a protective arm. His hand caught at the picking fingers, to imprison them, and calm them.

'Evelyn,' he coaxed. 'Evelyn.' Surely now she would let herself be comforted.

'Don't touch me,' she said, and pushed him away. He missed his footing, and falling, found himself, ridiculously, on his knees beside the bed.

It seemed very sad, and he felt desperately embarrassed because she had needed to use such a clumsy bludgeon to swat such a small butterfly. It was evidence of something, too; something about her ... but he lacked the experience to draw the right conclusion.

'I'll tell Uncle Matt in the morning that I am not going to ride. It's not worth the bother.'

That was the plain truth. A moment before, he had been on the verge of hating her because she wanted to stop him riding; and now he did not care. She had won after all.

She went over to the dressing-table and began to take off her face.

She said, quite sweetly — was she afraid she had gone too far? — 'You could be badly injured. Suppose you broke your back. Would you want me to have to go to work all my life to keep you?'

The sad part was, that he knew that was exactly what she would do; he ought to be grateful.

When the light was out she said, 'Time enough to ride in the National when you've made enough to leave me properly provided for.'

It was an olive branch.

In the morning he told his uncle, with a subaltern's curtness, that he had decided to give up steeplechasing altogether. Evelyn was highly strung, and she was not used to horses. The strain was too much for her.

Matthew Jegon said something about its being a not uncommon

decision for a married man to have to make. He did not say any more, and Hugh felt he had not even been convinced.

When they left to catch the early train to town, he felt that he would be too ashamed ever to come back to Troy again.

Leadbetter, on his knees on the hassock, looked like Billy Bunter saying his night prayers. The conveyor-belt creaked as it carried the mortal remains of this our brother towards the gilt swing doors that led, Hugh supposed, to the furnaces. 'Ashes to ashes,' C. C. whispered, and the doors closed with reverently mechanical slowness. 'They don't go to the furnace direct. There's a queue, you know. They're probably burning the chap before last.'

The congregation shuffled to their feet. The invisible organist played 'Sheep may safely graze' badly enough for it to be noticeable.

The seedy clergyman shook hands with the congregation as they filed out, giving each prosperous hand a consoling pat before he parted with it. Hugh followed Leadbetter out into the shady red-brick cloisters of the Garden of Remembrance. C. C. prodded the piled flowers with his umbrella. 'I always think red flowers are a mistake. Swinburne, I suppose.' With the ferrule of his umbrella he turned over a heavily black-bordered card. There were a few notes of music on a stave. 'Che gelida manina,' C. C. carolled softly. 'Well, well.'

Suddenly he pointed with his umbrella.

'There's old Best,' he said. 'Of course. That's the common factor. Paint. Our newly departed brother was one of those sturdy souls who stood out against the combine. D'you know, you've worked for me for nearly two years and you've never introduced me. Old Best is probably the most important man you know.'

'Old Best?'

'I've just had an idea.'

'Last time I saw the old boy was at a funeral.' Hugh did not want to meet old Best just now.

'At his age one collects funerals. Like schoolboys crossing off the days till the end of term.'

They threaded through the crowd to where old Best stood like a crumbling, forgotten monument.

Best said, 'Hullo, young fellow. Didn't know you knew Finch.'

Hugh introduced Leadbetter.

'Sad business about old Finch. Saw him only last Friday. Never thought. I was to lunch with him tomorrow. At the Reform Club. They say it was cancer.'

Leadbetter said, 'Fine chap. One of the old brigade. A character. Not very old.'

Best's eyes were watering, but Hugh suspected that was age. Best said, 'Seventy-seven. They don't come like that nowadays. Over in his varnish house every morning at eight o'clock. A Victorian.'

Leadbetter's motto was, You can never lay it on too thick. He smiled. 'There are still a few left, thank God. You're still looking very fit, sir.'

Best purred. 'Never had a day off from sickness in all my life. Sixty-one years. It's a long time. I'm nearly eighty, you know.'

'I'd have given you sixty-three, sir.'

Behind Best, his chauffeur hovered with rug-draped arm.

C. C. went on, 'I suppose the combine will step in now.'

Best pondered. 'There's a grandson. But he's not more than a child. Young Finch was killed in the war.'

'You should buy it, sir. The firm.'

'Hmm.'

'Perhaps we could have luncheon together one day. The three of us.'

Best stood very erect, as if he were a general ordering a charge in which thousands would be killed.

'Drop me a line, young fellow,' he said to Hugh. 'Fix an appointment.'

He stared at him as if he had just seen him for the first time.

'You're getting very like your mother,' he said. 'Pity she ran off with that frog fellow. Broke your father up, I should say.'

He retreated into the arms of the chauffeur.

'Drop me a line and I'll give you lunch.'

As Leadbetter explained it, it was simple. They would form a second combine by bringing all the independent paint and varnish manufacturers together. Most of them were quite small. Each of them had made a name by making one thing superlatively well; putty, or blacking, or cycle enamel, or distemper. Then they had been forced to produce all the other lines, just to give their stockists a chance. Sanders — 'Very good old firm, Sanders' — and Best & Maunt were the only big firms who had remained independent. The time was ripe for a floatation of that sort.

I was up to Hugh.

'If you can talk old Best into it,' said Leadbetter, 'the rest will safely graze.'

Hugh was sure Best would never agree. Similar proposals had been made before, and he had always turned them down.

'He's been to a lot of funerals since then,' said Leadbetter. 'He knows that after his, his sons will sell out to the International Paint people. I.P. will make a bid for Finchs, that's certain. The shareholders will have to meet. And while they're meeting, Best will be thinking of us, and his last end; and he'll see things differently. Better the hell of combination than the limbo of independence. That's theology.'

Then he said, 'You never told me your mother ran off with a Frenchman.'

As their car drove between the cypresses of the crematorium's sanded drive, a thin wisp of smoke floated from the chimney designed to look like a belfry. Mr Leadbetter took off his hat.

3 IN late August, at a little dinner in the Royal Curzon Hotel, Worthing, old Best finally allowed himself to be persuaded into signing the agreement that ended his nearly feudal control over Best & Maunt. Time and again it had looked as if he would wreck the whole deal by his

unremitting refusal to compromise his direct power. When he caved in, even though it was inevitable, it seemed an anticlimax, almost a disappointment.

Hugh had in his hand the half sheet of notepaper on which were scribbled the headings of the underwriting agreement, and the signatures. It was done now, it remained only for the lawyers to arrange it. The others had gone down to escort the old boy to his car for the journey back to Rustington, where he lived in semi-retirement, and Hugh was waiting to pay the bill for Leadbetter.

The promenade below the windows was gay with lights. To the east, outlined in tiny beads, the pier thrust out into the darkness of the sea like an over-jewelled finger; and there was the sensation of tiny shadows moving among the lights, a feeling of urgent, aimless life murmuring just out of reach in the darkness behind.

Directly in front of the hotel he could see people sauntering past, and there were very few; yet he seemed to hear the sound of those footsteps above the sound of the sea and the incessant scrape of the pebbles scrambling in the ride; and he had a feeling of nostalgia, almost a feeling of shame, because he was not there among the vulgar lights.

A wind-borne throbbing from the bandstand, a girl's laugh, a cigarette end's sudden glow as it arched down to the sea, the smell of fish and chips and seaweed ... there was life — and it was passing him by.

On an impulse he telephoned Evelyn. It was only nine o'clock. There were still trains to London, but he could not face having to explain all over again everything that had happened. He put it vaguely. He might still catch the last train, he said. Things were going well. But there had been snags — he could not tell her what they were on the telephone, and he might have to stay in Brighton.

'Just tell them you're coming home.'

He could hardly do that.

'Business isn't done at night. Don't be so weak,' she said. 'They don't want you hanging round them.' Besides — she was expecting



him. She sounded outraged; he had broken a taboo. 'You'll be home?'

'If I can,' he said. 'There are the pips. I'll try, but ...'

From the telephone box he could see C. C. and Uncle Alexander talking, fish's head nodding to bird's head; pudgy dropsical hands sketching signs to twisting interlocking hands' reply.

He glanced at his own hands to make sure he did not share that family trait. He had Jegon hands. Hands for a horse, a sword, or a woman. Not that he ever used them now.

He drifted across to join them. He felt very surly. Uncle Alex said, indulgently, 'Nothing here for a young spark. Why don't you cut along home?'

He said, 'It's my night off,' and was ashamed.

The band stopped, applause died away. A voice said, 'In response to four requests for her violin solo Miss Davies will play Drdla's Serenade.'

C. C. said, poker-faced, 'Give me classical music every time.'

Uncle Alex said he liked music — good music.

Hugh sat still. He knew, as soon as the bow touched the strings.

Uncle Alex beat time to the sentimental leaps of the tune, as if he were enjoying it. When the piece ended he said, 'Pretty.'

C. C. said judiciously, 'She's good. Striking looking girl too.'

'As an encore Miss Davies will play the Andante and Turkish Rondo from Mozart's Sixth Violin Concerto.'

Instruments tuned. The voice again, a little ruffled:

'I beg your pardon, ladies and gentlemen, Miss Davies will play "Jota" by de Falla. This will be followed by an intermission.'

She had seen him.

The brilliant little dance began. Whirled and snapped castanets came to an end.

Hugh found himself saying to C. C.:

'I wonder if I could borrow your car for a run in the fresh air?'

C. C. looked amused. It was the kind of impertinence he liked from Hugh. He was going to say 'No' just to provoke, when Uncle



Alex said, competitively, 'Take mine, old chap. As long as it's back here by half-eight in the morning, it'll be all right.'

Hugh got up and walked out of the lounge, found a waiter, wrote a note:

'I'll meet you outside the hotel entrance in five minutes. HUGH.'

He went to the garage. He had no plan; that part of his mind that used words to achieve its ends was silent. He was so much part of what he was doing that there was no need to think what came next or why. He knew she would come.

He waited while the garage hand filled up petrol and oil, checked water and tyres, as if for a desert journey. Everything had to be ready for anything. He was humming to himself.

'Ma chandelle est morte,  
Je n'ai plus de feu  
Ouvrez moi ta porte  
Pour l'amour de Dieu.'

Fennel came down the steps as he drew up outside the hotel. She had put a light scarf over her bare shoulders. It made her look demure and Quakerish. Though the night was milk-warm, he had a fleeting impression that she was shivering. He held open the door. She leaned her hands gently against it, closing it. In her practical voice she said:

'No. I've got to go back in six minutes.'

'I'll fix that,' he said. 'But get in.' He slid along the seat to get out. 'Please.'

She shook her head: a tiny, sad movement — determined, yet incomplete.

'Is it worth it? There'll only be a row, and I shall be fined.' She pressed the door against his opening hand.

'Get in.' He held the door open.

She sighed, and got into the car submissively. He ran up the steps into the foyer. He looked into the Palm Lounge. A woman with fair hair scraped back into a heavy bun was sitting on the dais fitting a new string to her viola. He was sure she was the orchestra manager,

and felt competent to deal with her as if he had known her all his life.

He said impertinently, 'Who does one have to tell when they abduct your leader? What excuse does one make? Should one say she has a headache, or that her brother is just back from Spain — or that she has neuritis in her bow arm?'

She took the string from between her teeth, twisted it round the peg.

'If one has any tact, one doesn't talk about neuritis. Or headaches.' She wound the peg. 'You're Hugh.'

She twanged the string once, looked at him with a cool, appraising stare.

'I thought you'd be taller,' she said.

She went to the piano, struck middle D, listened to her own D, tightened the string, sounded her Ds again; her eyes on him all the time.

'You're the last person I ever expected to meet.'

'Bad penny.'

'You said that, I didn't.'

'But you thought it.'

She looked away.

He said, 'I shouldn't have said that. Has she got a coat or something? It's cold.'

'It'll be somewhere. There's a rug.' She pointed the viola at the rug padding Fennel's hard gilt chair.

He took the rug. 'Thanks.' He had a feeling she was very much leaving something unsaid. 'You don't mind?'

'I do. But that's my business, not yours.'

'I'm sorry,' he said.

He drove, much too fast, through West Worthing out on to the Bognor road. Fennel drew the rug closer round her shoulders, staring straight ahead at the chalk-dusty hedgerows, flat, looming into relief, congealed into a frieze as the headlights fled past, then gone. They had reached the bridge across the Arun before she spoke.

'I saw Jean,' she said. 'A few months ago.'

She paused.

'I went to her as soon as I got back.'

She paused again, as though to be certain he understood.

'But I made her promise she wouldn't tell you.'

Coded, telegraphic, each sentence discharged its meaning at a silent level where words did not count. He understood, though he was hardly conscious of hearing.

A moth hit the windscreen with a brittle bump.

He said, 'I was at the Curzon in my capacity of financial wizard's mate. Fortuitously. As we say in the City.'

The road ran through tussocky salt-meadows beside the sea to its abrupt ending, round which huddled the flint-faced houses of Middleton. Hugh drove the car down on to the shingle and switched off the engine.

Her face was still, and set, in the straw-coloured moonlight. He touched her hand. It was icy cold.

He took off his coat, made her put it on, and tucked her up in the blanket, and she began to shiver uncontrollably. For a moment they were both very near to hysteria.

He got out of the car, said very slowly and deliberately, 'I'll be at least five minutes. I'm going up to the pub to order supper.'

He went across the stones towards the lights of the inn. At the door he turned back, saw the door of the car open, and watched her half run, half stumble, across the stones going westward along the shore. He loitered over buying a drink, spoke to the landlord's wife about supper, bought a quarter bottle of brandy, slipped it into his pocket, and then very slowly counted fifty. Then he went out. He had to walk nearly a quarter of a mile before he found her, huddled and desolate in the dark shadow thrown by a groyne. It was farther than he had expected, and he had begun to get alarmed. He was very glad to see her.

She was crying, quite silently, as she had always cried, abandoned totally to her grief; but she looked up at him, and he was sure she was glad to see him.

'I was going away, and then I tore your coat on a nail, and the shingle hurt my feet. Look — your lovely new dinner jacket.'

It was only a tiny hole in the sleeve near the cuff, and he laughed.

She said, 'Your wife will be furious.'

He offered her the bottle of brandy, and she lifted black sleeves like flippers without hands, and so he had to hold the bottle while she drank, and she nearly choked; then they were both laughing. She made room for him under the rug, and they sat together, wrapped like red Indians, sipping the brandy alternately until it was finished.

It was all so friendly. And they knew nothing about each other any more.

A jellyfish left stranded by the tide was a small phosphorescent target on the shingle; little waves made a scallop lace of froth on the sands, that gleamed whitely before they sucked away and left dry pockmarks in the moonlight. Oboe-like from the salt-meadows a curlew called.

'What was that?' she asked absently.

'Only a curlew.'

'Is that all. Only a curlew? Can't you find a nice, consoling bit of folklore to tell me about it? Or make one up? You always used to.' She sounded peevish. 'I don't expect you're trying.' Then: 'Oh, what's the good? It's so silly.'

'Go back to Worthing?'

She shook her head. 'We're here now.'

A cloud went across the moon; it passed. A tiny crab beetled along the top of the groyne. When he looked at her again she had not moved. She was still, still, still; a stillness like suspense.

'Wouldn't it help to tell me?' he said.

'What would you like me to tell you? About the men I've had since we called it a day? You didn't expect not to have successors, did you? Do you want to hear about how I flopped in America, or shall I tell you the lovely lovely dream I had last night when I dreamed I was dead? Is that dramatic enough?'

He shied a stone at the jellyfish. Another. Another. Without interrupting his stone-throwing he said:

'Would it help to know that I love you?'

'It's the magic word, isn't it. It stops you pitying me, doesn't it, to say that? So I can believe you've made a mess of your life too, so we're both on the same level, so I can tell you everything without being ashamed. That's all it means. Cosy.'

He threw a last stone, which hit the target.

'I still love you,' he said.

'Faithful Hugh.'

She did not say any more for the time it took for the church clock to chime three-quarters. Then she said, in her practical voice, 'Best go and have supper, I suppose.'

In the light of the room, they were shy again. They talked carefully of trivialities, of the queer requests people made of the orchestra, of racing, of C. C. Leadbetter, of the money he hoped to make out of the great paint deal.

'It might settle a lot of problems,' he said.

'Might it?' Her voice was a tiny tendril testing for a hold.

After supper they went out on to the iron-trellised balcony. People were going home from the bar downstairs. Good-nights were called, and hobnailed footsteps echoed down the street. A man spent a long time trying to mount a bicycle, veering all over the place as he rode away. A group of men were laughing at him — 'It's the oil he uses.'

Then they were both laughing, and she took his hand, swinging it with hers.

Mrs Suttler knocked; for some reason they jumped apart, swiftly, like lovers surprised. When she came in they were standing one at each end of the balcony. She asked if they wanted the rooms for the night, and Fennel nodded.

'The lady will be in here,' Mrs Suttler said. 'And you, sir, will be just down the passage on the right.'

Fennel said, 'She doesn't remember us. Unless you've brought other people here and she's being tactful.'

Hugh had to go down and see about the car. When he came back Fennel was in bed.

There was a spirit lamp burning on a bedside table, a kettle swinging on it, a tray and tea things.

'A nightcap,' she said.

He held out a tray himself, on which were two glasses of brandy.

'Nightcap.'

She said, 'Snap.'

They laughed.

But it had all changed while he was out of the room.

The kettle lid clattered, and he made the tea. She had turned on her side away from him and the sheet had pulled away. He could see the long curves of her back and the parallel shadowed dimples of the vertebrae under the skin.

'There's a Veganin in my bag.' Her voice was muffled by the coverings.

He found the bag, hesitated whether to open it. It was one of the intimacies they had always shared, but he had lost the habit; and there was a comparison, too, that he would not make. The catch clicked as he opened it.

There were two glass phials in the bag, one of Veganin, the other of Gardenal. He held them up.

'Which?'

'Veganin.'

'Gardenal? That's the stuff people are always taking overdoses of, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Oh.'

He had believed that she needed him, that she was in danger. He had felt free, and confident just because he could help her, just because he could be ruthless. But she had faced her danger alone, quite a long time ago, without his help. He felt deflated and a little silly. For the first time, he remembered Evelyn. He had nearly been unfaithful to her. It was as well he had been stopped in time.



He dropped the phials back into the bag, one, two. They clinked against her lipstick, or her keys or something.

He poured the tea, gave her the Veganin, breaking up the big tablet for her as he always used to. She blinked at the light, so he switched it off. He pulled back the curtains and threw open the windows, wide. That was how she liked to sleep.

When he turned back into the room she had finished her tea. He took the cup, put it on the tray, bent over the bed and kissed her lightly on the temple, and went to the door. He said, 'Good night,' as he opened it.

'Are you terribly shocked, Hugh?' Her voice was hardly a whisper. 'No.'

'I was so lonely ...'

He said, 'I think I knew.'

There was a long silence.

'Oh Hugh.'

He closed the door, came over to the bed, took off his coat, and lay down on the bed outside the coverings. He inserted his arm through the bedclothes under her head. His stiff shirt-front creaked as he pulled her head down to his shoulder.

She giggled. 'It tickles.'

He sat up and took off his boiled shirt and black tie.

'I don't think you'd better take off any more clothes.'

'Only my shoes. People do hate footprints on their sheets.'

'Experienced Hugh,' she said.

A moment later she lifted her head and pulled down the strap of his singlet. He slipped his arm out and her head found the hollows it knew on his shoulder.

'That's better,' she sighed.

After a little while he felt her fingers twisting and twirling the hairs on his chest: gentle remembered movements like the stirring of field-mice.

She said, 'What's she like, your Evelyn?'

Carefully matter-of-fact, he said: 'Difficult to describe. Brown hair, blue-grey eyes, rather a high forehead.'

'Do you love her very much?'

He hesitated, and she said quickly, 'Jean said you didn't love her when you married her, and you'd been falling out of love with her ever since.'

'Jean's a bitch.'

'She said you never went near Troy nowadays. Not even to ride Moonraker. She said you'd given up steeplechasing.' Her hand stayed still over his heart, listening.

'Evelyn gets worried.'

'Do you think I didn't? But I didn't stop you. Have you given up the idea of being a vet too?'

'No.' It was one of his dreams that one day C. C. would pay him enough money to convince Evelyn that it was possible.

'How much have you got in the pot now?'

'You see, Evelyn keeps charge of all the money ...'

'I see.'

Silence. He felt a little tightening of muscles, a flicker of eyelashes against his chest, and then the moisture of tears.

'Fennel don't ... please don't. I can't bear it. Fennel darling, I'm here again. Nothing in between matters.'

'Doesn't it?'

'No. It mustn't. Don't you understand? I love you! I've never stopped.'

'Do you?' Her voice was muffled by his shoulder. 'Do you?'

It happened then; as they had both known it must, from the moment they had stepped into the car outside the hotel.

A long time afterwards, Fennel said, 'We've still got the brandy. Remember?'

'It was Chianti then.'

'So long ago.'

'Day before yesterday. It's just struck twelve. A new day starting.'

With her lips, she traced out the pattern of the bones in his face, in one long gentle kiss. 'Dr Livingstone I presume,' she said.

Moonlight lay on their enlocked legs. Her head was in the crook

of his arm, her arm was thrown across his chest to reach his other hand, and she was breathing deeply and slowly.

He imagined her sleeping and himself watching her body wincing in sleep, shrinking back as people shrink back from a lorry in a narrow lane; waking her from the nightmare of the past relived, while she clung to him. 'Hold me close, close. Don't let me die.' Comforting her.

But in the end it was he who had the nightmare; and he woke to hear his own voice yelling wordlessly and it was her voice that comforted; and he felt quite extraordinarily guilty and ashamed.

After he had shaken off the terror of the awakening he saw that the room was hollow with the first light of dawn. He had an idea that she had not slept; he asked, and she shook her head.

'I didn't have anything to go to sleep for.'

When they drove back to Worthing, she sat with one hand on the seat between them, her fingers caging his. He could feel a vein pulsing in a hand, but whether hers or his he did not know.

Her eyes were closed, and it was almost as if she were smiling in her sleep. When they reached Worthing, by the pebble-faced tamarisk-topped wall where Heene Road opened on to the sea-front, she made him stop.

She kirtled the long skirt of her evening dress about her waist. With the plaid rug around her and her bare legs, she looked as if she had just been for a bathe.

She lifted his hand to her mouth, laid a kiss in the palm, closed his fingers right over the spot.

He said, 'We've got to talk, Fennel.'

A small boy with a shrimping net swam over-arm across the road. Half-way across he turned and swam on his back, making his land-fall by the sea wall. He pranced away, shouting as he went.

'Darling,' she said, 'I want you to know this. Last night ... it doesn't bind you to anything ... I went into it with my eyes open. It's something I've had.'

'We've had,' he corrected. 'It's going to be all right, Fennel.'

'Don't interrupt me, darling, this is important. You don't owe

me anything, you're quite free. If you've got to go back to Evelyn, it's all right by me, really all right. I won't do anything silly, Hugh. Not again. I'm yours. You don't have to marry me. If you want I'll give up music, we'll go abroad. Anything you want. But I—I won't share you with her.' She played with the door-catch. 'I won't be the other woman, Hugh. One little woman in the home's quite enough for any man.'

He said, 'It doesn't arise.'

'Of course it does.'

'No. Not for nearly a year now.'

'I wish you hadn't said that. It's such a cliché. Everybody says it when they make a pass at you. It makes it holy, or something.'

'It happens to be true.'

'At twenty-six?'

'At twenty-six.'

'Doesn't she leave you anything?'

'She's just not that sort of person. Fennel—I shan't have any money until this deal comes off—perhaps six weeks, perhaps six months. Until then I haven't a penny.'

He stared straight ahead into the glare of the early morning sun. 'But as soon as C. C. pays up, I'm coming to you.'

'Suppose it fell through, darling?'

'It won't. It's signed.'

'Will you tell her?'

'I've got to think.'

'Wouldn't it be best to tell her straight away?'

'No—I don't know.'

'Do you love her, Hugh?'

'It's not as simple as that. I owe her an awful lot.'

'I see.'

'You don't,' he said.

'I do ... my precious gloomy one. That's why I said you were free. You're still free, darling. To do it your way.'

'I don't want to be free. I want you,' he said.

'You've got to be,' she said, 'to have me.'

She leant forward, kissed him lightly on the ear, and was out of the car and beyond the closed door, and walking away.

When he passed her, she did not look at him; but he tooted the horn twice for an imaginary crossing, and in the driving-mirror he thought he saw her smile.

4 ALL that day he was tolerant of all his world, because so very few of the bowler-hatted men that composed it, with whom he jostled for lunch or whom he interviewed for C. C., seemed to have any inkling that they were not even alive. He was sorry for them, with their lavatory stories, their gardens, their tennis clubs and holidays, and their quite loveless lives. When someone brought the news that some director had been arrested at Dover, trying to fly the country with a show-girl and bearer bonds to the tune of fifteen thousand pounds, he understood and sympathized.

He said as much to Leadbetter during the afternoon, and C. C. laughed at him. 'You're very Victorian sometimes, you know, Hugh. "Romantic, he dared all for love" — or some such. If it is love, or even a bit of slap and tickle, there is always the divorce court. Less expensive, too.'

'I thought you didn't approve of divorce.'

'I'm a deeply religious man. No. He's a silly fellow, and if he's gone off with a bearer blonde it's because pinching the stamp money's his language.'

'In a way, though, I understand. It's so final.'

C. C. sighed. 'Perhaps you do at that. I had forgotten how high-principled you were.'

'High-principled? Am I?' Said in that particular wondering voice as if he had caught a flattering angle in an unexpected mirror, it sounded unbearably silly. 'Of course I'm not.'

'But you are.'

Across the table, Leadbetter's face looked old and obliterated, like a wood carving in a cathedral. The boss of a choir-stall, perhaps; a carving of a medieval peasant, that once had caught the sharp contours of a rustic, animal cunning, and now, worn and polished away by time and the rubbing of hands and robes and dusters, survived as an abstract grimace in the grain of the wood, a leer only, its cunning profound and quite meaningless.

'Of course you are.' C. C. dug his fat fingers into the desk. 'I've noticed it before. Children and clowns and thoroughbred horses are always more at home on the highest moral plane. You too, though I've never been able to decide just which.'

'Perhaps a bit of each. The infant centaur that gets slapped.'

C. C. said, 'Black Beauty. Black Beauty, that's who.'

Hugh said, 'The noblest friend of man,' and grinned. 'The horse who knew the value of money.'

They both said, 'Houyhnhnm,' at the same moment.

Nonsensical, schoolboyish, it was still a moment of total communication: a proof that some long-disused language was still his to use after all. There was a sense of release, like a feeling of actual physical lightness, a sense of seeing clearer, of thinking faster, a sense of thinking exactly what he saw; it was magic recaptured from a golden age, a magic of swift reflexes and decisions, a magic of power. Fennel was back, and he was no longer a foreigner in his own universe. Tonight he would tell Evelyn the truth, pack his bags, and go.

C. C. said, 'You're better than an injection. You always cheer me up. I wanted to talk to you anyway. You've done very well with this merger thing so far. How would you feel if I left it all to you? I'd be in the background if ever you need your suit ruffed, of course.'

Until that moment Hugh had never really given the thing a moment's thought. But when he began to talk he was surprised at the number of ideas he had, and how streamlined and efficient they seemed to be. C. C., listening, undid and did up a waistcoat button.

'Sounds splendid,' he said. 'Almost as if you'd thought about it.'



C. C. smiled, and with an almost feminine gesture of shyness at spoiling a mood, averted his eyes. 'Word of warning. Try and curb your aristocratic penchant for the frontal attack. Your *brio* — *élan* — or do I mean *panache*? I've an idea it worries your relative. He suspects irony. He's led such a sheltered life.'

It seemed an odd thing to say. Deadpan, C. C. went on: 'There's nobody who leads such a sheltered life as the really unimaginative man.'

Hugh smirked. 'No irony. No *fougue*. All shall be Oriental duplicity and Calvinist respectability.'

'Some day you must tell me why you dislike him so. But — no duplicity. No. You're the worst hand at duplicity I've ever met. You're far too impatient to lie well. You never give the other chap enough time to draw the wrong conclusion.'

Hugh chuckled. It was that sort of day.

When he got home and Evelyn called from the sitting-room that his father was there, he knew from her voice that something had gone very wrong. He scented bruised grass nonchalantly rearranged round a snare. But when he went in to join them it happened so quickly that he had no chance to escape.

He greeted his father. Evelyn put up her cheek to be kissed; he noticed that she did not look at him. As he bent over her, masking her from his father's eyes, she twisted her head away, stiffly, furiously. He hesitated, and with a swiftness that was itself a kind of violence — as if she were snatching at the moment he was physically off-balance — she said:

'Have you got a cigarette?'

Her voice was natural enough, composed and easy; but it was not the sort of thing she said; and it was said to attract attention.

He pulled a packet out of his pocket. She took one, and held out the packet to his father, knowing perfectly well that Aubrey did not smoke.

'What ever happened to your lovely silver cigarette case? The one your girl friend gave you?'

She had always hated it. Robin had given it to him to celebrate his first win on Furious, and it had a date in it. Evelyn had suggested once that he should have the date taken out.

'Don't you use it now?'

'It's somewhere about. I haven't used it for years. You know that.'

It was in pawn. He had needed the money for something quite trivial. He had been sure she would not miss it, simply because she hated it. Yet he had loved it, and when he pawned it, it had been as if he were stripping himself of the last thing that he would ever really possess for himself.

Evelyn said casually, 'Have you lost it? You're so careless.'

She must have found out. To stop her saying any more, he said, 'It'll be somewhere. When Father's gone I'll look. It's probably in my dinner jacket.'

She went on talking to his father, and then, hardly turning away, so that only by convention would Aubrey not hear, she interrupted herself.

'There's a letter from your pawnbroker on the table.'

It lay there open for all to see; a letter to remind him that the pledge was still unredeemed.

Abruptly his father moved, turning away to stare out of the window, rubbing his fingers against the stubble of his hair in the tiny gesture of embarrassment Hugh knew so well. And he felt sick and cold; he longed to be alone.

Very deliberately he folded the letter, and put it in his pocket. 'Stupid of me,' he said, enigmatically.

'Lucky it wasn't anything of mine,' Evelyn said, hardly interrupting her absorbed and animated conversation with his father.

'Wasn't it,' he said.

Aubrey woke from his trance.

'Here, I must be off. I mustn't miss my train. I must be off. Off!'

It sounded like a nursery game, and his small stylized rushes, as if to pick up hat and paper and book while he remembered, were like a child's mime of a man in a terrible hurry. His father had

always made a slightly comic facade to disguise his embarrassed withdrawals.

At the door Aubrey paused.

'I'll let myself out. Thank you, Evelyn, for my nice cup of tea.' Then, 'Look after each other,' he added over Evelyn's head especially to Hugh, and was gone.

There was a sort of total silence, like hatred everywhere. Hugh watched his father go down the street. In the set of his shoulders, and the rhythm of his arms and feet as he walked, his mood was plain: its sadness, its puzzled anger that was a self-justification too.

Hugh knew what his father must be thinking. The boy was always secretive and evasive in his dealings with me, and now he is being secretive and evasive with Evelyn. It is no longer a matter of opinion; the boy is secretive and evasive by nature. A liar. It is his character, and goodness knows where it will end.

Evelyn said, 'But how did you ever think you were going to get it out?'

'I shan't bother, I don't expect.' It seemed important she should not know how much he minded.

'More deceit. More lies,' she said.

'You don't leave me much alternative.'

'Don't blame me for that. You were a liar before we met. Everyone knows that. Your own father.'

'Yes, everyone knows that,' he said. 'Even me. And you knew it when you married me.'

Evelyn said slowly, 'You said you had changed. I thought you had.'

'Just for the record, I haven't lied. I pawned a cigarette case — it was mine — to save myself the humiliation of asking you for a pound of my own money. At least "Uncle" doesn't ask a lot of damn-fool questions about what I want it for.'

It wasn't any good. Being angry was only — another lie. He needed time to think things out.

She was saying something about trust and confidence. He said 'Yes,' blandly. After a bit she shrugged her shoulders and went to the kitchen.

The porticoes of the crescent opposite made a false perspective. The eye was led so smoothly along the curve to the tiny final square of light framed along the pillars, that one was hypnotized into believing that it was really far, far away. He was trying to spot the exact point where the illusion began. He bent down, swayed this side, then the other, peered through half-shut eyes. But altering his eyeline only brought a glimpse of yet another pillar of balustrade. There was no point of entry. It was a world sealed off by its own private laws, and he could never manage to get far enough back to penetrate it; and it was as if the thing he saw was a mirror image of something existing in his mind. It was exactly as if he were trying to stand far enough back from himself to spot the false infinity in his own character: and he could not do that either.

He knew he could never leave Evelyn, not until he had proved that she was wrong about him. As his father had been wrong.

Quite deliberately, of his own choice, from the first, he had made her his conscience. Instead of the love he had not felt, he had vowed a sort of total obedience — like a Jesuit's — an utter immolation of self. He had surrendered his right to be judge in his own inner courts of law, his right to evaluate the evidence, his responsibility. He had accepted her reality.

He had promised a change as fundamental as the caterpillar's in a cocoon. It had never been put into words, but it had been a bargain, and he had not kept it; and not keeping it was a lie, and that made the things he had said to Fennel lies too.

If she loved me it would be quite different. It was an article of belief that she did not. Yet in some complicated sort of way he was not qualified to judge ... Perhaps he had not wanted her to love him.

She had come back into the sitting-room. She was asking questions. About last night. How had it gone?

'You haven't told me. How did old Best take it?'

'All right.'

Had they signed? He supposed so. Would old Best go back on the agreement, as he always had before? Perhaps. When would they

get the commission? He did not know. How much would they get — approximately? He did not know.

‘Besides, I don’t believe in counting chickens, even if you do.’ He could not even answer her civilly, until he had made his decision.

‘I only wanted to know so I can plan the future.’ Her voice was hurt and defensive.

Then quicker than thought, something inside him broke from its moorings and floated up into a high-pitched self-justifying stream of words:

‘I wanted to talk to you. About the future. Yes. The future’s going to be very different. I’m going to chuck Leadbetters. I’m going to find a smallholding somewhere in the country. Somewhere just big enough to keep us. A small cottage. We’re going to start living. Get away from this morgue. Right away. And I am going to look after the money, I’ve been a second-class citizen long enough.’

It was so far from the things he ought to have said; and if she agreed, he would never be able to leave her. It was her only chance.

‘We might even have a child,’ he said. ‘People do.’

When he looked at her she was sitting very still, and there was a strained, puzzled look on her face, as if her heart was fluttering and she was afraid.

‘You’re in some trouble, aren’t you?’

He was touched because her voice was gentle.

‘Trouble?’

‘You’ve done something. I can always tell. You’ve done something ... silly ... haven’t you?’

‘For “silly” read “dishonest”?’

‘If you — if you owe any money, to Best, or C. C., or ... anyone, let’s pay it back and have done with it.’

‘But I don’t.’

He had cried for help. But she could only think that he had had his hand in the till. She was wrong about him after all.

‘Better tell me,’ she said. ‘Before I find out. I always do. I know you so well. When you invent crazy schemes it’s always because you’re worried. Because you’re ashamed of something.’

'It's nothing like that. Only I've got to get away from Leadbetter.' That sounded hysterical and guilty too, but she answered quite kindly, 'But you won't tell me why.'

'Because I hate the place. Oh, I've never said. I didn't want to hurt you. You got me the job and I ought to be grateful. I thought I'd get used to it and then it wouldn't matter. But I hate it. It's such a bore, bore, bore. You always say I'm all talk and no do. You say I'm all charm to outsiders, not at home, and how horrible to be so insincere. Well, that's what pays our bills. I talk. I'm charmingly intimate with strangers — it gets me places — with them, and with C. C. Like a tart with a client — that's me. A tart with a really perverse and dirty old man who just wants her to undress slowly, while he does the rest.'

She hated that sort of talk. Well, she would have to get used to the facts of life.

'It might have been bearable if you had given me some of the money I earned. Instead of saving it.'

'But why do you want to spend money on strangers? I am your wife. This is your home. Your home is the place to spend your money.'

'Are you my wife?' he said, as if it were something that had been forced from him. 'I am not made of stone,' he said.

He kept telling himself it was all justified, but he did not even believe it.

'Take steeplechasing. I gave it up because I couldn't leave you provided for if the unlikely happened. I loved it. It's one of the few things I've ever been good at. But I gave it up, and you've never even said thank you. We've saved nearly a thousand pounds, and you've never even suggested that I should take it up again.'

'You talk as if a thousand pounds was a fortune. I shouldn't get very far on a thousand pounds.'

'We could have taken out an insurance policy.'

It was all said quite quietly; but in his mind, he was storming at her in wild fury.

'Money isn't everything,' she said — and for a moment she



faltered. 'Money doesn't make up for a husband who isn't there.'  
'I thought it did.'

Then he was ashamed.

He said, 'Oh God,' and he was yammering. 'I shouldn't have said that. No. I didn't mean ... No, I'm sorry, sorry. I didn't mean. Forget. Forget.'

'If you're sorry, there's nothing more to be said, is there?'

She got up, picked up the tea things; and it was a dismissal, a setting of a small comma of reality after his words.

'But it doesn't alter anything. About leaving Leadbetters. I've got to do something creative. Make two blades of grass grow ...'

It sounded inflated and pompous, and he could read in her eyes her knowledge of its untruth.

'Can't you see, I'm rotting away?'

'If you've got to do it, if you've got to live a life like that, then you must do it by yourself. I'm not going to bury myself in the country because you're too high and mighty to work at a job in a proper manner like everyone else. I can't stop you. But if it's what you want you can pack your bags and go.'

'It's as easy as that? Just pack your bags and go?'

She said, 'You're so weak ...'

'That's established.'

'... You always put everything on to me. Always make an excuse. I don't want to leave you. But you want to leave me, so you make out I'm stopping you leading a full life, or whatever fine words you make up for it. So it's my fault.' She stood in the doorway, the cups and saucers held firmly in her hand. 'But it's not true. It's not fair when I'm the only person who helped you to get on your feet.'

A train went past behind the houses, and the window squeaked. He said:

'At the cost of any confidence I may ever have had in myself.'

'It's not fair, after all I've done for you. To be made look a fool. I always knew you'd run away in the end. Once you were on your feet, you'd have no use for me.'

It was so nearly the truth that he felt mean, and selfish, and abject.

'But good God woman, that's exactly what I am not doing. That's exactly what I'm trying not to do.'

'If you need to try so hard, perhaps you're best gone.'

She went into the kitchen and he heard her put the plates in the sink. He went out to help her wash up. He was no nearer making the decision than he had been when they started.

Next day when he got to the office there was a letter from Fennel. He had thought he would never see that writing again — the way the legs of the M's looked like semiquavers; the r's like a bar's-rest sign; a bird perched on telegraph wires ...

He opened it, taking it into the corridor so that no one should spy on his expression while he read.

Dearest, dearest Hugh,

I waved to you when you left this morning, but you did not look up. I knew you wouldn't. Someone might have seen you, and you would have hated that. You can't ever bear anyone to see into your heart, can you darling. Except perhaps when you're ashamed. I knew you wouldn't look up — but when you didn't I was miserable.

Darling, I still can't really believe it. When I saw you last night in the hotel, you looked so savage and arrogant as if you wanted to throw a bomb and blow the place to bits. And I thought, there he is, and I don't feel anything — I've always been afraid of this moment, but I don't feel anything at all — the ghost is laid.

When I got your note I nearly didn't come. I knew you would think you ought to make a pass at me, and that seemed a pity. Then I thought it can't matter. After all, we're both grown up, and at least then we'll both know. But then, just like that, suddenly you were through all my silly defences and you seemed to know everything that had happened without

my having told you. You just knew exactly — like an animal knows, and you understood, quite unsentimentally (I nearly wrote sexlessly but that's not right is it) — perhaps I mean amorally. And then it wasn't any good fighting any more. I knew I was still your girl — the other side of your penny. We're not just lovers. I belong to you in a way that's far deeper than love, in the rather chemical sort of way of those birds of yours that mate for life. It's rather a relief to admit it, darling. Like coming home.

You're such a strange person darling. You move in great leaps of intuition like a knight on a chessboard. (I think it must be a Jigon thing — your Uncle Matt does it. Jean too.) One moment you're safely tucked away in a corner all unimportant and the next — whoosh — you're face to face with the king and it's check. And then something happens. You really do know too, really understand — as if you're inside a person. But something happens then. I can't explain — but it's as though you won't believe it — you won't let it touch you. It's almost as if you had to punish yourself for knowing — as if it was wicked — evil — to be like that — and you turn your back on it — go away — hide. And because of that, you always make prisons for yourself out of people — their feelings for you — yours for them.

Darling — this time — please trust it — please darling.

Last night I lay awake so long telling myself that sooner or later you would leave Evelyn anyway. Flesh and blood simply couldn't stand it. She's bad for you too. All that business of looking after your money — can't you even go and have a drink without accounting for it? Not riding any more — no children — all the other noes. It seemed wicked, so mean and frightened. I hated to remember she was a woman. But this morning I can only think that in her own way she must love you. Perhaps she believes you love her. You must have wanted her to think that you did, or you would never have agreed to such a prison sentence. Or were you trying to make yourself believe that you loved her by agreeing? It's the sort of prison you make darling.

If you've got to serve a life sentence — that's all right with me. But it's not a real prison darling. It's something you've made up. Do see that —

You're mine and I want you. I'm better for you too. But you've got to be free. To do what you want. Not to swap one imaginary prison for another. I love you too much to want you to come to me because of a feeling that you are bound by anything that's happened in the past — last night — or two years ago — or five. You don't owe me anything darling. You have promised nothing. You are quite free. I want you to choose for yourself, not for Fennel or for Evelyn.

I couldn't bear you to come to me regretting that you had broken your word to Evelyn, hating me for pulling down something you had built up so carefully. Coming to me because you felt you had to. That is the only way you would really truly hurt darling now. Because if that happened you would be dead, the spring would be broken, and I should want to die too.

I've written this so many times. I wanted to get it all clear, but I wasn't going to send it. Then I thought perhaps it might make everything easier for you if I did — if you knew how I felt this morning when I was making all those silly prudish rules.

Darling I love you so much,

YOUR FENNEL

While he was reading, racing through the letter greedily, he had a feeling that she had found a key to his heart that had never been turned before, a feeling of a load lifting, of the world making sense.

He went back into his office. Very swiftly, very firmly, he wrote his reply.

Darling,

Don't — please don't worry so. There's only one thing to remember and it's a cure for everything. You're my girl — and I'm coming to take you away. Only because I love you. For no other reason.

Then he signed it: 'Your ticket of leave man — H.'

He stamped it and sealed it, wrote the address, and ran into the street to post it.

Now it could not be called back. Slowly he walked back to the office.

With his eyes wide open, he had put himself in the position that whatever he did he would be forced to go back on what he had promised either to Evelyn or to Fennel. He did not understand it. It hardly seemed possible that anyone with his advantages of birth and education could behave quite so mean-spiritedly.

5 THREE months later he was staring out of the office window. C. C. was talking about voting shares.

Down in the street there was a girl with a bottle-green hat going by. For a moment he thought it was Fennel. But it was just a girl in a felt hat.

The last time Fennel had been in town they had bought a hat. She had insisted that he should choose it. She was his girl, it was up to him. He had chosen a bottle-green felt, rather severe and plain.

'All the gentlemen like their ladies in a classic shape, moddom,' the sales-girl said.

Fennel put the hat on. 'We must please the gentlemen, mustn't we?' She studied herself in the long glass, pulled it down over one eye rakishly, turned and kissed him lightly. 'Thank you, I'll wear it away.'

She would not let him pay for it. When the girl went to get the change, she stared at the glass for quite a time; swung round with a kind of recklessness. 'Like me in it?'

'Why? Don't you like it?'

'Darling, it's sweet. It's just so terribly English. In France every man would take me for a tart. The high-class English tart. The sentimental one with slightly Lesbian tendencies. "But she's *viciouse*,

that one." I should be a riot.' She added: 'Is that what you want?'

Maybe she had not meant anything by it, perhaps it was just a thing to say ...

The girl in the bottle-green hat who was not Fennel vanished down the subway at the Bank.

... But she had really been saying that the longer it went on the less she was able to spare to love him ...

He turned back from the window and met C. C.'s eyes. C. C. looked away.

'You need a holiday, Hugh. Lately you've looked quite exhausted. General air of a delinquent orphan who has seen his mother and father burned to death in the fire he started in the waste-paper basket.'

'It's only this merger thing, I expect.'

C. C. shook his head. 'You look as if you were in trouble of some kind.'

'I leave that to other people.'

C. C. sighed. 'You look agonized. As if you were in love.'

'Agonized?'

'An expression of the eyes, perhaps.'

When he had a chance, Hugh dodged into the lavatory. The mirror showed eyes sunken and ringed with shadow. They did look agonized.

Agony? Perhaps that was what he felt. But agony was too presumptuous a word. Agony was the prerogative of the strong and the good. Agony was a noble emotion. Weak, contemptible people never suffered agony. If he felt anything at all, and sometimes he wondered if he did, it was not agony, but a kind of guilty suspense like being on bail and awaiting trial. A kind of straitjacket of suspense. You were conscious of the day of reckoning approaching, but you dared not think about it. You felt ashamed, to the point where even the word 'I' was unbearable to use, as if it had been bruised. You could not think about the future, just because you had done nothing — nothing — for three months.

You could not.



There was some decision to be reached first, that had nothing to do with leaving Evelyn or going to Fennel; and he could do neither of those until he had reached that decision. He did not know what it was, though he had a feeling that it was a decision that should have been reached years before, and had been evaded. Until he found the answer he was like a man who had lost his memory. There was a feeling that, in some specific yet unknown way, he was really completely different from the things he did — a feeling that some vital bit of continuity was missing.

In some way, Evelyn was the key to that missing bit of continuity, and his relationship with her was an exact recapitulation of some earlier relationship that had gone wrong — and must be put right.

One evening at the office, he was tidying papers on his desk, for no other reason than to delay the moment when he must go home. He could hear the cleaners at work in the general offices below. He had made up his mind to go, when he heard the dry, guttural beating of wings outside his open window, as the starlings came back to roost for the night. All day one starling had rested there, perched on the coping of the false balcony that ran round the building. One of its legs was broken, the claw drooping and closing when it moved, and a wing trailed, as though it could not fold it properly. It had huddled all day among its untidy feathers, listless and immobile, ignoring the crumbs and the water he had put to tempt it. It was ten or eleven feet from his window.

Now the ledge was crowded again with starlings — twenty, thirty, perhaps thirty-eight — along the coping: restless, quivering, greasily iridescent, like great wood-lice.

They had left a clear space on either side of the injured bird, an invisible barrier some few inches wide. Once, it tried to cross that space, and the nearer birds rose in the air above it, stiff-legged, wings outstretched and creaking, until it retreated again. The other starlings made grating, metallic sounds, and slowly fell silent and still, standing stiff, as if they expected something. Then — and after

the stillness it was eerily frightening — the air was filled with the throb and shudder of wing-beats; and in a wild, cruel panic the starlings circled — and dived at the injured bird, pecking at it, binding to it, hawklike, with their claws.

He banged on the window to drive them off; yelled, threw a pencil. It made no difference; the storm of birds whirled and struck like an obsession.

He slipped off shoes and socks, stepped out on to the coping. With his back to the brick, he began to edge slowly along towards the dying bird.

A bird's wing struck his naked foot, and he looked down. Eighty feet below, the Bank Picket marched along the street, sunlight sliding redly from their fixed bayonets. The policeman held the traffic for them to pass. Tiny bowler hats in the street turned to watch the black bearskins crawling like furry bees.

... It was almost as if he were falling ... as if he could watch himself turning over and over in the air below himself. It wouldn't hurt at all ...

He was too scared to make the small shift of balance necessary to go back, and he knew if he went on he would probably fall. To stop himself thinking about it, he went on, edging steadily along the coping, eyes firmly fixed on the tarnished golden hands of the church clock opposite. It was seven minutes past six.

Inch by inch he slid his feet along the rough cement, keeping his back pressed tight against the wall and his hands spread like suckers against the ruts between the bricks.

Once he felt a sharp pain in the sole of his foot. He supposed he must have stood on a stray nail, but he did not dare to look.

The birds took alarm, standing treading air with ragged spread wings around his head.

Suppose they struck at his eyes ...

His fingers touched a rod, corroded with rust and grime — a lightning conductor. He freed it so that he could just slip his fingers between rod and wall. Swiftly, he stooped and grabbed the bird. It struggled, lifting its wings against his hand, but he held it

firm. He slipped it inside his shirt, and could feel the thin wild fluttering of its heart against his own.

He began to work his way back, birds all around him.

At twenty-one minutes past six he reached the window, and half fell, half threw himself back into his own office.

The office cleaner screamed. As if to explain, Hugh put his hand inside his shirt and pulled out the starling — put it on the desk.

It was still alive. It had been blinded. The eyes were just two round holes in raw bone, its neck feathers were all plucked away, and the grey pimpled skin was cicatrized with wounds.

Mrs Beatty said, 'Poor little dickie birdie.' She clicked. 'Dickie like milkie? I'll get it some milk, sir.'

Before she came back the starling had died.

With a sudden impulse of tidiness, Hugh dropped the body into the waste-paper basket.

Mrs Beatty returned with the cat's saucer of milk. She seemed relieved that the bird was dead; it made her feel funny to touch them, she said. She was cross because he had put the body in the basket; she would not clean it up — not for anything; so he picked it out of the basket and went out to the lavatory and pulled the plug on it.

When he came back she said, 'Just look at you, sir. You're all blood. Look at your poor foot and hands. My, you are in a state. All for a little old dead bird. I dunno, I'm sure.'

Drowsiness was like a fog, an impenetrable wall of sleepiness all round him. He yawned in her face.

'Best let me put some plaster on those cuts, sir. I've got some plaster in my bag.'

While she was painting his grazes with iodine, she said, 'You hadn't ought to've brought that bird into the office. A bird in the house means a death — always means a death.'

'Well it died, Mrs Beatty, didn't it?'

'I suppose so,' she said. 'You look worn out. Proper starved you look. Let me get you a nice cuppa tea.'

He let her fuss over him.

Just as he was going, he said, 'Do you believe in love, Mrs Beatty?'

She considered for a long time, appearing to discard several answers that she found intensely amusing, before she answered.

'Like in the story books? Bless you, yes. Course I do. You'll find out some day, sir.'

Hugh said, 'Oh, I believe in love like that. I expect the trouble is I haven't got the character for it.'

Mrs Beatty said, 'Wait till Miss Right comes along, sir. You'll feel different then.'

The extraordinary thing was that he did. He must be in love. Everything had come into focus as if he had discovered the real Hugh in the real situation, and knew what he must do. It was all quite settled ...

First he would tell Evelyn the exact truth.

When he let himself into the flat, Evelyn called, 'You're late.'

He went into the kitchen to her. She was standing with a rolling pin in her hand. When she saw him she lifted it, fractionally, as if he were an intruder.

'What has happened?' She was afraid and therefore angry.

'What do you mean — what has happened?'

'You know perfectly well — your shirt all covered with blood. Look at your fingers. Besides, you're limping. But you say, all bilious and pompous, "What do you mean?"'

He tried to tell her about the starling ... and his moment of panic looking down; but telling only blurred the picture, and she did not believe him. She thought he had been drinking. She came near, and he knew she was trying to smell his breath. At last she said, 'You mean to say you risked your life to save a bird?'

'No. No. No. You see I knew it was dying when I started. Only ... Evelyn, I couldn't bear it.' Surely now she would understand.

'You didn't think of what would happen to me. If you'd fallen.' She sniffed. 'If it was dead, so much the worse.'

'It had broken its leg — and they were mobbing it. They hate things that aren't the same,' he said.

'Such a senseless thing!'

'Can't you understand? No. Of course, you wouldn't.'

She went very white. He thought, that is what *woebegone* means — looking like that.

She said, 'I'd been wondering if all this — the last weeks — if perhaps it wasn't my fault. I know I'm not interested in the country; horses and birds and land. But it's in your blood; I wondered if I was standing in your way. I wondered if you'd be better off if ... I wasn't ... you said we hadn't got anything in common — and I was sad.' Then abruptly she was raging with anger. 'What a fool. As if you could have anything in common with a man who behaves like you do. No one could, because you're mad. Nothing touches you. You're not responsible. You ought to be put away.'

He stared at her. Once again he had failed.

She said, 'Stop staring at me like that, stop. I can see it in your eyes when you stare like that.' Melodramatically she slipped round the other side of the table from him, and hovered. Then the door slammed behind her.

The bedroom door closed; the key turned. When he went into the passage to speak to her she would not answer.

Very well. He was damned if he was going to humiliate himself by talking her into a mood friendly enough for him to tell her that he was going to leave her. If she could not understand the business about the bird, it was pretty certain she would not understand anything else.

Before he went to bed he made some tea. He always did. He called Evelyn, asking if she wanted some.

'Of course. What do you think?'

He heard her unlock the door. When he took in the tray, she was in bed. She looked exaggeratedly exhausted. She took the cup, stared at it, examined it, turning over the tea with the spoon. Then with an air of deciding to get it over, she drank it all.

'That's that,' she said. 'If you put anything in it, it's too late now.'

He was profoundly shocked. It was so vulgar.



'You mustn't say things like that.'

'You'd do anything if it suited you. You're mad enough. Why don't you do it and get it over? You hate me.'

He could not speak, but he stammered his denial with his whole body.

'If you had any feeling but hate for me, you couldn't have done a senseless thing like this afternoon.' With a simple gesture of exhaustion, she picked at the blanket; rolled the strands between her fingers; let the fluffy ball fall into her cup.

'You're such a snob,' she said pettishly. 'I'm not a lady, so everything I've done for you is wrong. But it was all done with a good heart. It's all been for you. It's not fair for you to turn it all against me. You were glad enough of me when you were down.'

He took the teacup; stood, waiting for words.

'If only you'd admit that you hate me,' she said. 'That would be something. It would be honest.'

'No ... No ... No.'

'But you do. Why don't you go if I'm so hateful?'

He took the cups into the kitchen and washed them.

The next day he saw Fennel. They met in Arundel for lunch at the Bridge Hotel. She was waiting for him in the lounge. It was market day. All around her were groups of farmers drinking, seedsmen, stockbrokers, implement salesmen, tomato growers from Worthing — in Arundel there was always a chance that he might meet someone who knew him.

He was gay and exhilarated as he pushed through the crowd towards her. He kissed her with impertinent, almost ostentatious proprietorship, and at lunch sitting beside her at the corner table that he had wangled out of the waiter, he stared round the room with the mock arrogance that had always been one of their jokes — the feudal lord and his lady surveying the merry herd.

'There's old Tyzard — drowning in his soup. Quick, Fennel, he's just coming up for the third time.'

He imprisoned the hand that rested on the table beside his; bent



his head sideways almost to the table to look up into her eye as a child might, coaxing.

'You look so lovely. If only all these people weren't here.'

'But that's what you want. We always meet in public now.'

There was no resentment in her voice. She stared at the table cloth while the waiter laid plates and cutlery.

'In public, you can love me,' she said, when the waiter had gone. 'In public, on the surface, where people can see ... You've got to take that risk, at least.'

Always, at the beginning she was cruel. He had got to bear it. If he bore it unflinchingly it would still come right. It must come right.

'How is Evelyn?' she inquired politely.

'Fairly bloody.'

'Who wouldn't be? You're being a pretty good rotter to her.'

She was silent for a long time.

'When it's all over, will there be anything left of her? Or me? ... Or you?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'I just don't know anything any more.'

That sounded so self-pitying and false that he was horrified. Yet it was true.

'Come to think of it,' he said, 'it's a pretty stupid thing to do. To tell your girl friend everything about how you don't seem to be able to leave your wife.'

'Pretty stupid,' she said. 'But you're a pretty stupid person.'

'But I've got to tell you,' he said, sullenly, almost priggishly, not knowing quite what he meant, or how to reach her. 'Because as long as you know everything I'm not being just a cad. I'm not just being weak.'

She said, 'Aren't you?' And then: 'I wonder what lie you told her today.'

'Fennel. I've got the whole day to be with you. We've got a whole day together. Don't spoil it.'

Quite deliberately — he could sense her doing it, and was oddly put out that she could do it by a simple act of will — she closed

away her mood. She shut her handbag with a snap, as if to close it on time past.

'Darling, we'll do something wildly romantic and adolescent. Let's go for a walk in the rain. We'll walk for miles, to Middleton, to your cave, wherever you like.'

Suddenly he could forget the disquiet, the tension. It would be like old times. It must be old times. Everything must be as it always had been. He would make it so.

After lunch they climbed up through the dripping woods to walk westward along the saddleback past Halnaker. She smiled, guessing where they were going; and it was as it always used to be. Exactly.

It was raining, as it had rained for a week. Every leaf and tussock and hoofprint carried water, and the wet air above the downs echoed with the mutter of water trickling away through the water-logged chalk underfoot. The turf sucked at their shoes. Fennel's hair hung in damp tails beside her wet face.

They chattered as they had always done — interlinked, interweaving chains of free associations without fear of hurting. A stray dog attached himself, and they sent him on absurd errands, to stop him shaking his wet coat over them. They threw sticks, invented rabbits in imaginary holes for him; and laughed at him when he believed.

They stopped; both at once; turned towards each other at the same moment, so that somehow it was a moment completely shared; and kissed.

'I'm glad you haven't got a moustache,' she said thoughtfully, and they giggled.

Then, betrayed by a contrast he should not have felt, by something that afterwards he tried to think was honesty, but at the time made him catch his breath at his own stupidity, he said, as if it was some kind of joke:

'By the way, last night Evelyn accused me of trying to poison her.'

She made him tell her; as perhaps he had meant her to. He told her about the starling; about Mrs Beatty, about Evelyn. They

walked apart now, a yard or so on either side of the track up the hill. They reached a ruinous post-and-rails fence above a disused chalk-pit. They went up towards the turf overhang; and there they stopped, standing each by a post, looking down on a trolley rusting in a pool of green-gold water, and the steep chalk walls that seemed blue with moisture.

'You're so far away,' he said.

'How much longer can you go on like this?' she said.

It was a practical question. Her voice was cool and interested.

'I don't know. It can't go on much longer. It's torture.' He shied a rusty nail down at the trolley. It fell short, stirring a white mist of chalk in the water.

'Is it?'

'I don't think even I can stand much more of it.'

'That's up to you,' she said evenly.

'Fennel. What am I doing wrong? It sounds pretty weak, I suppose, but this is the only way I know ... and I'm losing you fast.'

'Yes.'

She stroked the green lichen on the post with a finger-tip.

'Hugh, will you tell me one thing, honestly? Have you had the money from your deal? You have, haven't you?'

He heard his voice, bothered and aghast.

'No, Fennel. No. Even I wouldn't do that.'

'Promise?'

He nodded.

Rain gusted into his face. He put his fingers through the slot in the post, as if to keep them warm.

'That you've got to believe,' he said portentously.

There was a pause. The dog barked urgently.

'Yes,' she said, levelly. 'I've got to. I wish I hadn't got to.'

He looked down at his hands. They were trembling. The rain was running down his wrists and jerking in little streams on to the post with his trembling.

It occurred to him, as a kind of pun, that they were awfully near the edge. The ground was treacherous, and it was a damn silly

thing, to venture right up to the brink. One moment, inside his mind he was smiling at the double meaning. The next moment he was frightened — really frightened, with a physical reflex of wanting to run away.

He called urgently: 'Come away, Fennel!'

'Why on earth? Don't be a fool, Hugh.'

'Please, Fennel. Come away.'

She shook her head stubbornly, and he was angry. He turned to move across the space between them, swiftly, yet circumspectly. For some reason he was on tiptoe. As he moved he had a notion that it was luckier to keep his feet just inside the line of yellow-bleached grass where the rail had been lying.

'Will you come? At once.'

'No.'

He darted across the last yard, seized her by the waist, lifted her off her feet as she struggled against him, and carried her down the slope to the path.

Now she was angry. 'What is all this? Hadn't you better explain?'

He was panting, trying to think of an answer. He stood for perhaps a quarter of a minute trying to think what to say. Then he shook his head wearily and said, 'Hyster ...'

There was a sharp bone-jarring sensation under his feet, like a kick; a queerly permeating, dull metallic ring in the air all round them, like cast iron fracturing; and slowly, as they turned to see, the cliff edge seemed to drift ... floating away from their feet. More slowly still, it split into fragments, a honeycomb of earth and light hung on the air; and with a huge slow shrug burst forward into the quarry below, thundering down to cover the troiley and the rails.

The sound died away; and the echoes.

A flint broke from the edge and fell.

*Plop.*

The rain was white with chalk dust.

'But you *couldn't* have known,' she said.

He shook his head.

'General principles. There's always a catastrophe waiting to catch me. I was too quick for it this time.'

'You told me to come away.' There was still a note of anger in her voice.

'That's right.'

'And I wouldn't. But ... you made me.'

'Something like that.'

Relaxed, confident now, he smiled gently at her questioning eyes. She was pale. 'Son teint d'une paleur lunaire.' Aunt Bess had said that, so long ago. But now she was exhausted.

He said, very softly, 'Fennel darling. I shall find the way. In the end. If you'll only wait.'

'It's our only chance, isn't it?'

He nodded.

'I've got to find it for myself. You see ... '

He hesitated.

'I've never found it before. Except in crises ... '

Uncertain, she said, 'They're your language, aren't they?'

'But,' he said, slowly, 'the bird was dead.'

'Nothing you did could ever kill it.' She was sad as she said it. And then, as if the years between had never been, she was smiling. 'Do you know what we're talking about?'

'Not really. But it's fun that way. It's always a nice surprise to find how wise the silly things one says are, afterwards.'

They raced each other down the hill, and then standing to get their breath by the alder coppice in the bottom, she pulled him to her urgently.

'Darling.' She twined her fingers in his. 'No one would see.'

They went into the coppice. It was dry and silent, and it smelt of earth and leaves.

6 THREE days later the underwriting contracts were completed and a date was fixed for the public issue. C. C. paid Hugh his commission, watching with a glaucous, sardonic eye when he put the envelope straight into his pocket without bothering even to open it.

He carried it round loose in his pocket for days. He did not even trouble to put it in his wallet. As long as he did not use it, it was as if he had not had it; he could let it all slide for a day or two longer, a week, ten days — waiting for the sign that must be given.

There were times when he was filled with a savage, resentful mourning because he was so mean-spirited, so spineless, so weak; yet in an obsessive sort of way he had a feeling that if only he could endure — if only, this time, he could find the guts to see his own weakness through to the point of disintegration, and beyond, if need be — at the other side he would find his own true humanity. He had got to grin and bear it. So as to be a man at the end. That was what it came to.

What made it all much more difficult was the fact that almost overnight Evelyn's mood changed. It was rather interesting. It happened the very day C. C. paid him. For three months she had been totally hostile and resentful. Even to serve him a meal had been hateful. Then, and it was so sudden he wondered if she had learned about the money somehow, she was friendly, friendlier than she had been since they were married.

When he came in that evening she greeted him at the door. She always did — but now she said, 'You look so tired,' and tiredness was her symbol of tenderness. When a person was tired he could be fussed over — provided, of course, that she noticed it first; if one said oneself 'I am so tired,' then it was self-pity.

Over supper she had talked, gentle and friendly, of what they might do when they got the cheque. Perhaps they should take a holiday. Perhaps that was all that had been wrong. They were tired. He had worked so hard, for so little pleasure. So had she. But ... suppose they went on a cruise? She loved the sea. It would



be fun to see a bit of life. But if he did not want to do that, they could go to the Continent. France, perhaps.

'You could show me all the places you used to know.'

He was evasive. It seemed the least hurtful dishonesty.

Her voice lost all its colours of excitement, though she remained friendly.

'You must be tired,' she said, 'not to want to talk about France.'

Later, washing up, between dresser and draining board, she said, so quietly it sounded coaxing:

'There's a girl, Hugh, isn't there?'

He nearly told her the truth. It was so gentle and friendly, her voice, and he wanted so desperately to destroy his loneliness — but it would have been too easy, too cosily easy. He had to stick to his guns. At all costs he had to be self-supporting.

'I don't think so,' he said, making his voice sound gaily impertinent.

'You don't think so?'

'No.'

She was going to say something, but for once she would not come straight out with it. She prided herself on speaking her mind. But now she hesitated, looking for the friendly way to insist.

She said, 'You don't sound very sure.'

'Quite sure.'

She dried the crocks while he washed the cooking things.

'You can tell me if there is. I shan't be angry. I'd rather have the truth. I can always face the truth.'

'There — is — not.' He made every word tell, like a careful shot.

'Because then I could understand better,' she said.

'Understand what?'

'Understand why you've treated me so unkindly these last few weeks ... ever since you came back from Worthing that night. I don't think you realize how hateful you've been.'

It was so exactly what he had thought about her, that he did not

know what to say. Perhaps after all, she had been justified in treating him the way she had. Perhaps it was not her, but him.

On Saturday afternoon they went for a walk in Kensington Gardens. That was so much a habit that it would have been strange if they had not. Evelyn became involved in a mild flirtation with a poodle. She always had a great feeling for other people's dogs. She stared regretfully after it when it left them.

'It was so sweet,' she said. 'But — I thought poodles were bare. They are bare. This one had a coat like a little woolly lamb. How did it get its woolly coat?'

He explained gravely that it had a special little fur coat to wear outdoors, that did up with a zip fastener under the belly.

She gave him a look of quite total delight. She believed him. She was even disappointed that she had never known such a delightful thing before. When the dog wandered back, prancing up straight-legged to her snapping fingers, she felt all over it trying to find the fastener. Then she laughed, a laugh of pure happiness, and told the dog's owner what she had been looking for. And it struck him, laughing at her, with her, for the first time for so long, that she really was only a child. He wished he had known before.

If only she had laughed more often he would have loved her. But, with a sardonic flash of honesty, he knew that if she had been kinder, more tolerant, more amusing, he would have been unfaithful to her long before, and she would have found out. So anyway the thing would have ended.

But it was better when she was friendly. When she was friendly the sadness in his mind was so much less self-centred, so much more detached, like the sympathy you feel for a character in a play — an insight, an explanation, rather than a feeling; and he could feel himself — and when he knew about himself he would be able to act. Nothing he did could be dishonourable then. Until he did know, everything would be.

But it did not seem to help much. One evening when he came in she was waiting for him at the door. Resentful, impatient and

peremptory, she held out a letter addressed to him. She had opened it.

'Perhaps you can explain the meaning of this.' In her voice was the undertone of exasperated contempt that always underlined her accusings. 'After what I told you ...'

It was an order to view some decrepit croft in the Highlands. The estate agent described it as suitable for an artist.

'You open my letters now!'

'I've got to know what's going on.'

Her voice sounded faintly frantic, and, because she could not trust him, pitiful.

'I rang them up. I told them if they sent any more I'd return them unopened. As long as you're married to me you've got a responsibility to look after me. If you wanted to be a peasant you shouldn't have got married.'

He said, 'It doesn't mean anything that it might make me happier. I'd have thought if you loved me you would want to make me happy.'

'Love me. Make me happy. Poor little self-pitying ass.'

He could hear her control slipping away.

But it had not been self-pity. He was sure he only wanted to know the nature of her feeling for him.

'Happy?' she said. 'As if you could ever be happy. Nothing's ever enough for you. You always want more. You want everything a person's got.'

'Why can't you give it, Evelyn?'

'Oh, I gave, all right. Until I saw it wasn't any good.'

'But if you feel like that about me, why do you want me?'

If he could understand that, surely he would understand everything. But to have to ask, and of her, seemed only mad and unreal and sick, like a tramp stumbling down a street muttering questions and answers in his private world. Yet he had to force her either to explain, or to admit the contradiction in herself. It went on for a very long time. It was just another row.

★

Next morning there was a letter from Fennel waiting for him at the office. She had come to an end. It was obvious that he was not coming to her and could not find the guts to tell her. She had decided to go away.

You must have had your money by now. You forget the papers are full of your new big company. If you want to stay with Evelyn why don't you tell me? — I shouldn't be the first girl whose boy friend hasn't come up to scratch, nor the last. If you haven't come by Friday I shall know you will never come, and you will never find me.

FENNEL

PS. I can live without you Hugh. I always have.

It was awful.

His first thought was that now there was no need to leave Evelyn.

During the day he paid the cheque into his bank. He had told Evelyn that was what he intended to do, but when he came out into the street again he felt furtive and guilty, as if he had cheated her; because when he had said it months ago, neither of them had believed that he meant it, and in a way he had traded on that. Yet when in the evening he let himself in to the flat, it was to find that stepping from the buff-coloured gloom of the staircase into the bright, tailored lightness of the tiny entrance hall was quite dismayingly, and totally unexpectedly, to feel at home. Like an animal's winter lair, rank with the scent of his own stillness, his own hibernation, it was as comfortable as an old coat. It was the place he had chosen; a world built to his own specifications; an indolent world where he was understood; even indulged. He had chosen it. If he had been lulled to sleep away his life without responsibility, it was through his choice alone. Everything was as he had chosen that it should be, even those things he most resented.

He had only himself to blame for everything, even his servitude. He had never given Evelyn a chance.

In that moment he believed he had found the final insight he had waited so long for, and nothing need ever be quite so bad again. Now at least he knew about himself, and the honourable course was plain to see.

It was a challenge, simple, heroic, direct. It would make all the difference.

It made none. Why, he did not know, but from the moment after supper, when he told Evelyn that he had paid C. C.'s commission cheque into his own bank, and she said wearily, 'That's the last we shall hear of that, for sure,' everything was exactly the same as it had been the night before; three weeks before; three months before. Even the words they used, their gestures, their inflexions, were the same; fixed in a ritual of misunderstanding and self-justification, an inescapable groove.

'Evelyn — I've got to learn to stand on my own feet. Before the muscles atrophy.'

'Nobody is stopping you.'

They went round the maze again and again, they could not break out. If only for a moment he could make her believe he really meant it — everything would come right.

In the morning he said, 'It doesn't have to be Scotland, you know, just the country.' He had to stick to his guns, but he was strong enough to make concessions.

'If that's what you want, you do it by yourself,' she said. 'I've said that a hundred times. You'd have thought you'd have got it into your thick skull by now.'

'That's final?' His voice sounded pleading.

'It's up to you,' she said. 'You can do some choosing for a change.' She put up her cheek for the goodbye kiss. 'You'll be in for supper.' It was a statement, not a question.

He turned to go down the stairs, sliding one hand down the banisters to the point of no return.

'I don't expect so,' he said; and just to keep from falling, he had to follow his hand and leap down the five stairs.

At the corner of the stairs he looked back.

The door was closing.

He ran down the stairs as if he were late for his usual train.

It was tea-time when he fetched up at the Royal Curzon. He had not told Fennel he was coming, so their meeting had to be staged — as a surprise — as a joke; he had even thought of wearing a false moustache. In the end he settled himself in the Palm Lounge with his back to the orchestra's stand, and surrounded himself with a wall of newspapers. He ordered tea and muffins, which arrived while they were playing 'Rendezvous', which the programme said was the favourite piece of His Majesty George the Fifth.

Fennel played a solo — a sickly, chlorotic tune with a great deal of vibrato and harmonics right up in the rosin — 'Pas des Écharpes' by Cecile Chaminade. There was mild applause, and the orchestra left the platform.

A moment later she was standing by his table.

'Well?' she said, as if he owed her an explanation and there was only a minute of time left to make it in.

'Me voici.'

In the same urgent yet quite impassive voice she said, 'You got my letter.'

His eyes were on her face trying to construct from its stillness the living image of the love he needed to feel. He had to find the one thing to say — to do — that would convince.

The words came almost without his knowing — like a ventriloquist's voice from a dummy.

'I've come because I want you. I've left Evelyn.' For some reason, he added: 'For ever.'

She stared at the butter congealing in the muffin dish.

'Does she know?' she said quietly.

He wanted to comfort her for her bad opinion of him.

'Am I really as bad as that?'

It was best to keep it light.

She put the little domed lid back on the muffin dish.



'Yes.'

She ran a thin finger, flexible as cartilage, round the gold and blue rim of the cover.

'Yes ... you are.'

He said, 'Evelyn knows.'

Everything had to be pared to the barest essentials.

'About me?'

'Yes.'

'You've got to say that.'

She was studying him with passive curiosity.

'You're lying, aren't you?'

He shook his head.

She went on, with gentle indifference, 'You can still go back to her. Since you haven't told her, she need never know. You could catch the next train.'

She paused.

'I would never tell her, you could count on that.'

At the corner of her lip a tiny muscle jangled.

But he had a kind of precise physical certainty of what to do. He dropped his eyes. When he lifted them to hers again they were almost woebegone.

'Can't afford it,' he said. 'I only got a single ticket.'

'Haven't you had your money?'

'Southern Railway won't take a cheque. Of course — if you like to lend me the money ... I'd pay it back.'

'Fool,' she said. She smiled.

'Ridi Pagliacci.'

A moment later she said, with mock pettishness, half to hide the remnants of her fear, half to hide the fact that momentarily at least she had been convinced:

'But you're still up to no good. No good at all.'

'Not this time.'

It was very strange. He was too tired to say any more.

'Not this time.'

The orchestra were tuning. She had to go. But she who was

always so decided about things like going, seemed unwilling now to move away.

She said, 'It is all right? It is all right, isn't it?' — and he nodded.

She said, 'I suppose I've got to believe you.'

Then she was gone.

Across the geraniums, the palms, and the ring of waiters' backs near the service entry, from so far away it was like being in hiding, he watched her. Small pointed chin held the fiddle in place against her shoulder; fingers made their last secret, obsessive adjustments. The noodling of warming, tuning instruments died away.

Three tunes had been part of their private vocabulary: the slow movement of a Mozart fiddle concerto — the last; an early Chopin nocturne — the one in D flat like a Bellini lullaby; and a tune from *Oh Kay* — 'Someone to watch over me'.

' ... There's a saying old,  
Seek and ye shall find ... '

Thank God at least he had had the guts to lie about leaving Evelyn. Whatever happened he must never never go back on that. The lie must be the starting point of his new life. He must live it until it became the truth, like a spy's cover story; if he stuck to it, it would come true. It was the only way to explain why he had come. Without it, coming to her was only a movement in space, meaningless, unkind.

' ... Someone to watch over me.'

Afterwards they met in the foyer.

She said, 'Fancy meeting you.' But it was only shyness now, he was sure. 'Where are you staying?'

'The Royal Curzon.' It sounded friendlier than saying 'Here.'

'It's not that sort of hotel.' She eyed him gravely. 'Not up to your usual standards of discretion,' she said.

'I was so glad to be here with you. Under the same roof. It was like running a race.' He kept his eyes steadily on hers. 'This was the winning post. After I reached it, I just couldn't think any further.'

She squeezed his arm. 'Isn't it lucky we're both sorry for the same person?'

'Out of breath,' he said, and he began to pant, dramatically. She laughed.

There was a little pub just round the corner in Chapel Street, she said. They could get a room there for a night or two. Until she was free of the orchestra.

'We could take your bags round now, and get ourselves installed.'

'I'll do it later,' he said. 'While you're soothing the *suprême de volaille*.'

'Why not now?'

'First ... we ought to go and buy a ring.' He could not let her see that he had brought no luggage with him. If she knew that, she would know that he had lied about Evelyn.

'You know what people are. They always think the worst ...'

She said, 'But it would be fun. I'd like to see our new home. Why don't you want me to?'

'Ring first.'

He had to be alert. Every step was dangerous, and he had to be ready to think fast and accurately, to feel with hair-trigger delicacy, to act ruthlessly, immediately, precisely. Her happiness, and his too, depended upon his being exactly the man he would have been if his lie had been true.

She made a tiny movement of raising her left hand, an unfinished sketch of a gesture to show him the third finger. She had been going to say, 'But we've still got the Woolworth one. Remember?' She had not said it though. Perhaps she had used that one in America.

She said, 'What sort of a ring? It can't be a wedding ring. You're married already.'

'Not so as anyone would notice.'

'What a damn silly thing to say. If you're married to someone else, you're married. What's the good of saying you aren't? If Evelyn starts divorcing you tomorrow it will still be a year.'

She said, 'A year,' again, to hear how desperately long it sounded.

'Yes.' He tried to stop himself hurrying the last few steps across the foyer. 'Yes.' Through the swing doors, down the steps with the plate glass wind-break, into the bleak December sea wind, along the front. 'Yes. Only' — he began. Then he said, 'It doesn't make any difference.'

He began again, 'I wasn't going to say, for a bit. Not for a day or two. But — it's best you know. Honester. Evelyn refuses to divorce me.'

'I see.'

They were going along the sea-front towards the little stone-walled curl in the Parade that children call Splashy Point because at high tide the sea is all round it and the waves run up the wall to break in the air over the sea-girt fortress. But the tide was out. The sky was dark, and the sand and shingle; and in between, gleaming like dead, flabby skin, the daylight was slipping away on the horizon. The silence between them was treacherous. More treacherous to speak.

Yet — he had had to tell that lie too: it followed, had to follow, from the first. He could not let her believe that Evelyn was going to start divorce proceedings when she was not: when she did not even know that she had reason to.

Towards Shoreham, there was a fire burning on the sands. A column of smoke leaned and broke inward towards the houses.

She said, 'What a mess. What a bloody beastly mess.'

'But I won't let it hurt you ... I won't let it hurt you.'

'How can you stop it?'

She was, in a controlled and gentle sort of way, quite distraught.

'You can't stop it,' she said.

'Evelyn will come round. I know she will.'

'I'm not a child, Hugh. Why should she? What's to change her mind?'

It did not seem possible that he could go on. There was no real answer. But he heard himself say:

'Just time. Time to realize that it's not just another thing that Hugh's said he is going to do.'

The column of smoke was hardly visible now in the twilight. 'You can hardly blame her if she didn't believe me,' he added bitterly.

She said, 'No.'

Then for the first time she took his hand. She squeezed the knuckles until the tears came into his eyes with pain.

'Hey. That hurts.'

'Punishment. Good for you,' she said. But she lifted the hand to her lips to kiss the poor knuckles better.

She had to go back to the hotel and play for cocktails. He took the chance to slip away and buy himself some gear. He bought a suitcase too. There was a Railway Lost Property disposals shop open, and he bought it there, because it had to be a used suitcase.

He was walking back to the hotel when he saw the sign 'CARS FOR HIRE' and suddenly knew what he must do. He went in and hired a self-drive car, and drove round to the hotel. On the way, he stopped at a jeweller's and bought a ring. An eternity ring.

Her eyes lit up when she saw the car. She knew where they were going, and she was pleased.

Along the coast road, he stopped and switched off the engine. There was the wind and the sound of the tide coming in, and through the murk the evanescent fleck and gleam of waves.

He held the little chunky parcel in his pocket ready to give to her, but there was nothing he could say. It ought to have been so important, so spontaneous. But now it seemed he had only bought it to keep his word; and in his mind was only the terrible loneliness of knowing that anything he said when he gave it to her would be meaningless — even the truth.

It seemed so hopeless, but he had to go through with it.

He pushed the little parcel into her hand almost roughly.

'A presy,' he said; and while she was unwrapping it he was staring out through the windscreen, at the darkness and the windy sea.

He could see her movements reflected in the windscreen. The paper unfolded. Then she knew what it was, though she had not

opened the box. She looked at him for a moment, and he did not look at her, then she put her fingers to the catch.

As the lid opened he said, 'Eternity — a word meaning for ever and ever.'

His voice was firm, but he had not known he was going to say that.

She said, 'For ever and ever,' and caught up his hand and carried it to her cheek.

She held out her wedding-ring finger, and he put it on, and they both said, 'For ever and ever,' at the same time; and then they giggled because it sounded so solemn and absurd.

She said, 'I'm ravenous.'

'We'll have our everlasting breakfast at the Ship.'

'Mistress Hugh Maunt,' she said.

7 SEVEN months afterwards, just after the police had charged him with murdering Fennel, in the interviewing room of Lewes Gaol, he tried to tell Fairfax, the barrister, about that day. It was like talking about someone he had met in a dream, someone so unreal and obsessed that he could hardly believe that it had been himself.

He had just told him about the ring, when Fairfax leaned across the brown oilcloth of the table, against pointed fingers pressed into the table's edge, and said, with deliberate and brutal directness — to startle:

'Not to mince words, you found you no longer had the same feelings for her as you had had in the past, and you lacked the moral courage to tell her.'

The barred sunlight lay across the smeared dull oilcloth.

'I wasn't any good to her unless I was master of my fate. That was the bargain. And I wasn't. If she had known the truth about the



way I left Evelyn she would have known that I wasn't. I thought if I lied, it would be a crutch, until I was.'

He picked up Fairfax's pencil from the table in front of him and held it as a gnomon to the sunlight, making the shadow fall exactly parallel to the shadow of the bars. Fennel would have laughed at him, for making magic.

'It very nearly worked. If I'd had just a little more guts it would have worked.'

Then he said, 'No, that's not true.'

Fairfax looked at him over hands interlinked and raised to his lips. He drew his lower lip down between the index fingers. Released it.

'It was what I needed to believe ... But there wasn't any alternative, really. Not for me. I knew she was at the very end of her tether. She was so fragile, fragile-spirited. As if she had lost too much blood.'

Fairfax watched his beautiful long fingers spread on the air in front of him. 'Of course ... As you know, her condition —'

'No, No, Mr Fairfax. No.'

'You did not know she was going to bear your child?'

He was shaking his head. 'No. No.' And then it slipped out: 'Please.' But it had only needed courage, to know.

'She did not tell you?'

'How could she?' He was shaking his head again and again. 'How could she?'

Fairfax made a tiny abrupt movement of thumb-nail against finger-nail, a swift glimpse of embarrassment.

'I ought to tell you about the Ship. It was rather a place of ours. We'd been happy there. When we got there they were glad to see us. We had supper, and afterwards we went and sat in the snug with the longshoremen, and ... it was as if she was getting stronger. As if what I was doing was working. She was happier. One of the tide-liners wanted her to be his partner in a game of darts, and she said, "You must ask my husband" ... She couldn't have said that ... before.'

Fairfax said, 'Go on.'

'We were planning what to do. Where to go, what job I was going to do. Because of the business of names, we decided to go to France for a bit. We had a lot of fun planning. We always liked touring Spain and looking at the castles ... But I made her get to bed before closing time. She did not want to go, but she was so tired. After she was in bed I went for some brandy and milk for her; when I came back she was asleep.'

He got up suddenly, began to pace up and down by the table.

'Then, in the morning, it happened. I was in a panic. I started ... that is ... well, I told her the ...'

Fairfax said sharply, 'What happened?'

He paced once across the long room under the barred half-windows. The floor was made of wood blocks, and he pointed his toes exactly into the angles made by the blocks. Then he was facing the grey-painted wall. Elephant Grey for Institutions.

'Nothing. That was what happened. That was the point.'

It was silly to be embarrassed. He turned and faced Fairfax, his hands behind his back on the cold painted wall.

'She was sweet about it. She talked about strain and tiredness and all I'd been through, and not letting it worry me.'

Fairfax ran round under one nail with another. 'It has happened to other people,' he said.

'Never to us ... Only ... she made a joke about my guilty conscience. I don't think I even heard her. I was too shaken by what had happened. It seemed so symbolic somehow, and it was as if nothing in my whole life would ever look quite the same to me again.'

He walked back to the table and sat down. He would not let himself fidget even with a pencil. He sat erect and still.

'There's no point in going into all that now,' he said firmly. 'Nothing to be gained. As I told you, I didn't really hear what she said. She said "Hugh," and I looked at her; she was staring at me, and it was as if she had been watching my thoughts. I moved —

looked away — anything to break the rhythm. But I was too late. She knew.

‘I was in a panic then. It was like being in a vacuum ... cut off ... as if I’d always been in a vacuum. Just me and a few things that weren’t true. I had to break out ... before it was too late.

‘I blurted it all out. I said, “I’ve been lying, Fennel. About leaving Evelyn ...”

‘It was strange. She only nodded. It was getting quite light. I could see her face ... and it was like watching happiness die. If I’d had the guts I could still have saved the day. Since then, I’ve thought of dozens of ways. But I wasn’t quick enough. Once I’d started, I had to tell her everything. About the cottage in Scotland ... how I’d kept the cheque in my pocket for nearly ten days ... the lot ... knowing what I was doing.

‘I couldn’t even face her while I was telling her. I was standing in the little Trafalgar balcony, looking at the sea. There was a lilac-coloured sky, and the sea was dull like sodium; I didn’t look at her.

‘When I had finished, she said, “Oh Hugh,” very very softly. She didn’t cry. She just sat on the bed. She was running her finger up and down the grain of the wooden bed-post. She didn’t say anything at all. I suppose I had been expecting her to forgive me afterwards. Being forgiven is one of my higher trumps. I specialize in it. Kiss it better and let’s have a fresh start. But looking at her I knew it wasn’t any use any more. I said a lot of things. I would have to.

‘Only — after a long time she said, “You haven’t left anything. Of us. Of you. You haven’t left me anybody or anything.”

‘I tried to talk her round. I couldn’t believe that it was all done, finish. Now I’d told her the truth it seemed as if there need never be another barrier between us. I told her she had only to have the courage to trust me, and it would be all right. She was gentle and kind. She seemed to understand, about me lying, and confessing — both; and she was sorry ... no ... compassionate. But the spring was broken. She just couldn’t take any more. But it was as if she were comforting me ...

'It was quite a long time before I saw what had to be done. It was the only practical thing to do. It solved everything. No loose ends. And it was something to be *done*; not words.'

Fairfax glanced at him sharply, speculatively, but only said, 'Go on.'

'First thing was to go down to the bar and pay the bill. When I came upstairs again, she hadn't moved. She was still sitting on the edge of the bed ...

'I was sure there must be some way to reach her. But I didn't know what it was. I went and sat down beside her and put my arms round her. I promised her that it would all come right in the end. If only she would come to France. I said if we were together, and she would let me look after her, I was sure that, one day, some quite small thing would happen and she would see that I had really changed. She would know; and after that, everything would be better than ever before.

'But I couldn't reach her. It was only words, I suppose, and ... she just shook her head ...

'Then she said she thought she'd like to be alone a bit. She'd be all right alone, she said. I didn't want to come away ... I was worried about her. I found something to say, of course. I said "Really all right" and she said "Really all right." I said something about being back ... She shook her head. "It would only tear us both apart," she said. "Please not, Hugh. Please."

'I kissed her goodbye. It was awful. I couldn't really believe it at first. But when I did, it didn't seem to make any difference to what I had decided.

'I went to Worthing and talked the local branch of my bank into cashing a cheque for most of the money in my account. It took a little time, ringing London and so forth. I didn't get on the road again until nearly twelve.

'I left the car in a garage near Amberley. I told them to take it back to Worthing. I paid them. I had lunch in a pub. Then I walked up to the old flint mine, under the downs.'

Fairfax nodded. 'Where they found her.'

'I collected some wood and lit a fire. It was pretty cold. I wrote a couple of letters.'

Fairfax watched the muscles of his wrist turn his open hand over. It was a period gesture, a gesture for ruffles and lace, signifying the courtliest scepticism. 'Of course,' he said. Then he explained: 'The one letter that can't, in the nature of things, ever be answered back or denied. The one time one can speak without fear, one can repay.'

'No.' He shook his head. 'This wasn't like that at all. One was to my bank. I wanted them to pay what remained, into Evelyn's account. I told them I'd be out of the country for a bit, and would they accept this as my final authority — that sort of thing. I wrote to Fennel. I told her that I had decided to go away for a bit and work things out. I told her that I loved her. I put all the cash from the bank into the envelope with the letter. I told her I wanted her to have it. Then I sealed them.'

Fairfax said, 'Extremely businesslike,' with such malicious approval that they both smiled.

'It had to be undramatic. I couldn't afford to be sorry for myself. Oh, it was genuine enough ...'

He had picked up Fairfax's pencil again, and was holding it in his two hands as if to snap it in two.

'It was genuine. In a sort of way, I'd been getting ready for it all my life. Fennel was right. Most of the time I was an absentee. If I couldn't have life on my own terms I wouldn't have it at all. Mutiny against living. So I might just as well resign permanently and stop hurting people. Serve me right. I didn't awfully mind. If Fennel hadn't come ... I'd have gone through with it — without a second thought.'

He put the pencil down on the brown oilcloth.

'That's rather a good joke,' he said. Fairfax frowned.

'I saw her long before she got to the top of the down. Coming up the path from the station.'

'She was climbing the hill. Not hurrying; only stopping sometimes just to look up. As if to see if she was on the right path —



perhaps to see if she could see me. I don't know. I put the pistols away; and the letters I'd written.'

As if that was important.

'I told Jean it was a suicide pact. I think it was. We both knew. Only we never talked about it. We just didn't mention it. It was there between us all the time. We knew.

'For a long time we just sat and talked. It was peaceful. In a way we were closer than we had ever been. She had always sheared off telling me about America ... It was neuritis. Agonizing pains in her bow arm. The first time during her very first concert in New York. While she was playing. She struggled through to the end of the piece, then she had to leave the platform. They gave her massage and heat treatment and it seemed to clear up. Then it happened again. Somewhere in the Middle West. So badly that she broke down completely. She fainted on the stage. They cured that too. But she had begun to be frightened; whenever she played she was expecting it; dreading it. And of course it came back ... until she had to give up — the tour — everything. She knew it was not a real thing. It was something that began in her imagination. But she couldn't help it — control it. She had always been so terrified of an audience. I told you. There had been a man too, and that had gone wrong. She had nothing and nobody.'

He could hear his own voice. It had the flattened pitch, the weary separated syllables that are the masculine equivalent of tears to a woman. He sat up erect on the wooden chair and said briskly:

'I'm sorry. I'll try and cut it short.'

Fairfax seemed to be concentrating on the movement of his own fingers against each other as he clasped and unclasped them. He prompted gently. 'You didn't discuss the situation?'

'Once I said ... I tried to tell her I was sorry. That in spite of everything I loved her. I said I needed her.

'She wanted to believe. She hesitated. Perhaps she was trying to see it absolutely clearly. Because she didn't say anything for a long time. Then she shook her head, and said, "That's the trouble. You



don't. In your lonely little world inside, you're absolutely sufficient to yourself. You don't need anyone. No one at all."

'I said, "You're the only person who could help me break out." But she shook her head. I couldn't go on. It was getting dark by then, and she said she was thirsty. I tried to get her to come down the hill with me to get a drink. But she did not want to. In the end I said I'd go down and get her a lemonade or something from the pub at the foot of the hill. It was so ordinary a thing I didn't think twice. She smiled, she was so relaxed and ... serene.

'I wasn't away very long. When I got back, I could smell the powder in the gallery. I hadn't thought that she knew where the pistols were kept. And when she had seen them before, she had been afraid of them.

'She had shot herself through the heart.'

Outside, in the eaves and the Victorian brick turrets of the prison, housemartins squeaked cheerfully. Down a long tiled corridor there was the sound of footsteps going away. They halted. A key turned in a lock, a small polysyllabic exclamation of steel. Fairfax said, 'Go on.'

'She hadn't died at once.'

Fairfax across the table was sitting sideways, one hand over his eyes. Making night in his mind? 'You told your cousin there was a letter.'

'That was later. I didn't see it for a long time. It was dark. There was only the fire. I ... I didn't ... it was morning before I saw the letter.'

'Twelve hours later?'

'She had written it in the hotel before she came. After I had left. It was rather a terrible letter ...'

He sat very still. He could not afford to make a gesture or an inflexion that might in any way seem afterwards to be a plea or an excuse, or a stage direction.

'... At the time,' he said. 'It was not one of your suicide letters. She blamed herself for what had happened. She said she had wanted too much too quickly. She couldn't blame me, it wasn't

in the shop. She said she still loved me; perhaps she always would, but she couldn't reach me any more, and she was so tired. Some other things. Private things.

'But she had known from the very beginning what it had taken me all that night to learn. That even my wanting to kill myself was phoney. She said it was my blackmail on people — running towards death. She said she knew I had never said so, only everything I did, said so — plainer than any words. She knew it wasn't real, and she knew that until I had found out that was a lie, everything else I did could not but be a lie.'

Far away down the corridor, steps approached, halted. Again the key made its small coded sound, the grille squeaked open; shut; the key was turned again. The steps came past the door.

'There's nothing more to say, Mr Fairfax. I sat there all night with her. Thinking, remembering all sorts of things I thought I'd forgotten; and it seemed they all added up to the same thing — and it terrified me.

'There wasn't anything to kill.'

Fairfax sat for a long time with his hand still over his eyes.

Then he was looking up at him.

It was very strange. Something in that look reminded him of his father.

Fairfax seemed to be waiting for him to say something. But there was nothing more to say.











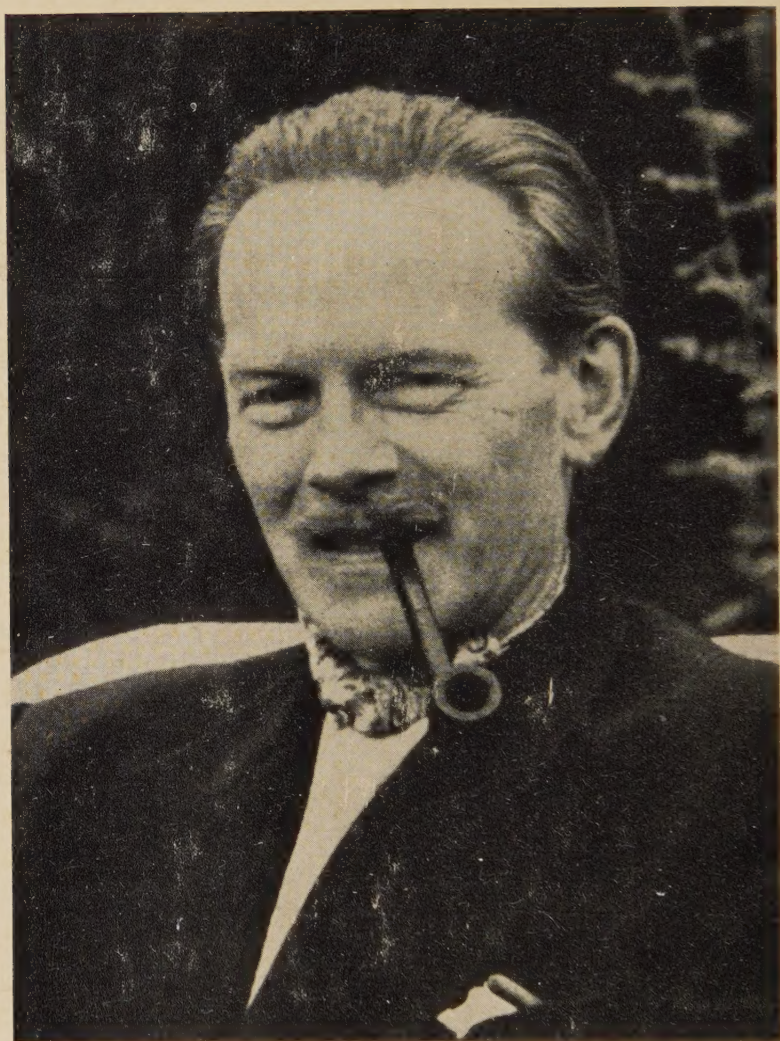
# ONE MORE SUMMER

**Edward Stephens**

ONE MORE SUMMER is the story of a small town in Southern California and the people who lived there. Partly it is the story of Gladys Harwyn, who with the aid of her young son ran a motel with no man to help her until Ray Meyers came along and moved in. But mostly ONE MORE SUMMER is about her son, Philip Harwyn, and his tortured struggle to seize his own manhood the best way he could, with no father but Ray Meyers to guide him. It is the story of Vivian Crisp, too, and how she helped Philip in her own special way, and Irving Searle, a sex-frustrated real estate operator whose lust hung over the town darkly, an oppressive counterpoint to the warm Southern California sun.

In telling this story of a tangled web of beach-town lives stirred by the bright flat sun and driven by the inescapable rumble of the waves, Edward Stephens has written a deeply moving and absorbing novel.

*Printed in the U.S.A.*



JOHN COUSINS was born in China and attended secondary school in England, where he now lives. He has had a variety of jobs, including that of ostler at a circus, and has worked in motion pictures. During World War II he was in the RAF. This is his first novel.

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